

A SHADOW IN THE WILD

•This is a powerfully written novel which grips the reader from the start and never lets go right up to its magnificent climax.

It concerns a little girl, picking flowers in a forest, who witnesses the murder of an old prospector by a man she knows. From that moment terror pursues her, for the murderer becomes aware of the fact that she has seen his crime, and he is determined to silence her.

There are stories which stand out and become etched in one's memory. It is no exaggeration to say that this study in terror and growing suspense is one of them.

Also by Whit Masterson

BADGE OF EVIL

ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT

DEAD, SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL

A SHADOW IN THE WILD

by
WHIT MASTERSON



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To
JANE AND NED

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STAND anywhere in Southern California and you may see the mountains simply by turning your head. An ubiquitous backdrop, they hover over the narrow coastal plain, for ever separating it from the harsh desert to the east. Lacking water, they are not fertile, nor are they rich in precious minerals. Pioneers, pushing west, found them only a barrier and not a stopping-place. They crossed the ranges, sometimes with great hardship, and built their homes and their cities in the gentle valleys beyond. They did not linger. Neither did those who came after them. As a result, the mountains have scarcely felt a man's imprint or been altered by his presence.

On the map it would appear otherwise. But maps are boastful. They show the highways by which man travels through the mountains or the air routes by which he flies above them. They give names to peaks and streams and valleys, and elevations above sea level and distances in miles. In doing this, maps foster the comforting illusion that the wilderness has been vanquished and that what Southern Californians call the "back country" differs from their individual back yards only in size. But it is just an illusion.

Take a man of the coastal plain, strip him of his car and road map, remove him from the paved highway—in some spots no farther than a hundred yards—and he will find himself in a world where he is as much a stranger as he would be in the middle of the Amazon or the Sahara. It can be a terrifying world of forbidding canyons and treacherous ridges, a criss-crossing up-and-down world of dead ends and awesome vastness, cruel and inhospitable. And man, though a more complex organism than the lower ani-

mals, does not possess their homing instinct or their adaptability. Detached from his well-ordered environment, he often becomes confused, panicky, lost. Occasionally, he dies. This happens to the mature as well as the foolish, to the strong as well as the weak.

And if it should happen to a child . . .

THURSDAY AFTERNOON

SHE had come as far from camp as was allowed. She realized that when she looked back and could barely distinguish the shape of the tent among the pine trees. Yet the wild flowers she had come to pick were still a hundred yards or so farther on, in the middle of the broad meadow that was called Chinese Flat. For a moment she hesitated, remembering her father's explicit instructions. But Father—she no longer thought of him as Daddy, though he would prefer it—was taking his afternoon nap and surely he wouldn't mind if she went just a little way farther. There was nothing to be afraid of. Besides, she reasoned smugly, I'm not exactly a baby any more, for gosh sakes!

Janie Cooper was ten that summer. As she firmly believed, she was no longer a baby. But neither had she crossed the line into adolescence, as she liked to assume. It was an invisible barrier against which she pushed impatiently, causing it to bend rather than break. Her mind was given to occasional flights of fancy whose sophistication would have surprised her parents had they been aware of them. On the other hand, she still played happily with dolls. Physically, Janie was about average, perhaps a trifle taller than most, thin with long coltish legs and regular features that gave no definite clue as to whether she would turn out to be pretty or plain. She was an only child and, consequently, somewhat spoiled. And, occasionally, lonely.

Like most imaginative persons, Janie Cooper didn't mind being lonely, at least on certain occasions. There was even a melancholy kind of sweetness about it. Like to-day, for instance. It was somewhat thrilling to wander the broad meadow, the only moving creature, and imagine herself completely alone in the world. Of course, she knew better, so it was really all right. She was only in the Encanto Mountains, which she could see from her bedroom window at home every day, and their camp in Portal Canyon was only a mile from Hannah Crossing and that little settlement was, in turn, only a mile from the main highway which led to the city where she lived.

"I wish I could stay here for ever," she said aloud, almost meaning it. But the week's camping trip, so eagerly anticipated, was now nearly over and, with it, the summer holidays. Sunday, Father would have to take her back to Mother so she might begin school the next day. Janie had still not yet got used to thinking of her parents as separate entities living apart from each other. It had all been explained to her very carefully and, of course, she was familiar with the idea of divorce from television. But the why of it still eluded her young mind. Why couldn't they live together again and be happy instead of . . .

She forgot her plaintive musings at the sight of the bed of yellow deerweed that bloomed beside the trickle of water known as Linger Creek. She ran forward and knelt to gather the long-stemmed flowers and fashion them into a bouquet. They're like fairy gold, she thought, and instantly embarked upon another fantasy wherein a prince happened to ride by and saw her there and fell in love with her and carried her away to his palace to live happily ever after. But then she saw her reflection in the placid creek and had to grin. I don't look much like a princess right now. To save brushing, her hair had been tied back rather sloppily with a green ribbon and her tanned face bore some faint traces of the cherry pie they had eaten at lunch. Her

clothing was heterogeneous—dark green cycling jeans, an old Brownie blouse that was quite snug now, a red twill jacket, dirty white socks and (her special pride) genuine Indian moccasins that her father had bought at the lodge in Hannah Crossing. From a leather thong about her neck dangled a toy telescope with a tiny compass inset on the barrel, another present from her father.

Janie unslung the telescope and studied the compass, aligning the needle with the big N as she had been taught to do. Now let's see, she thought, suppose I was lost . . . Of course, she wasn't but it was fun to pretend. A rise of ground prevented her from actually seeing Portal Canyon, where their camp was, but she knew it was there to the west. Behind her—north—loomed the smooth hump of hill that was called Breadloaf. On the south the meadow was bordered by the low sawtooth peaks of Black Ridge. And to the east—only a little distance away from where she sat—began the tangle of badlands known as Devilgut. It was a complex of small canyons and gullies, choked with trees and rocks and brush, carved haphazardly in the far-off days when Linger Creek had been a fast-rushing river and the meadow had been a lake bed.

Janie had been expressly forbidden to venture into Devilgut and was, therefore, irresistibly drawn to it. "Pretty rugged country, I guess," her father had said when asked. "No place for us, anyway." Which didn't really answer her question, of course.

She picked up her bouquet and got to her feet, thinking it was time she returned to camp. As she did so, Janie noticed a large flat rock half-buried in the grassy meadow at the mouth of Devilgut. It's like a platform, she thought; I'll bet I could see all the way down into Devilgut from there with my telescope. Tempted, she hesitated. Her instructions had been clear: not to enter Devilgut and not to stray out of sight of their camp. But that rock isn't exactly in Devilgut, she reasoned, and besides I should be able to

see our tent from there, too. I wouldn't really be disobeying Father—not really.

Carrying the bouquet in one hand and the telescope in the other, she skipped ahead, following Linger Creek till she reached the boulder. It was taller than it had appeared at a distance, taller than her head, but there were handholds and she scrambled up the side until she could stand triumphantly on the flat top.

She gazed around with a mixture of pride and awe. Raised above the rolling floor of the meadow, it seemed as if she hovered over the world. She was surprised to see that she had come so far. Portal Canyon had almost vanished in the blue haze of the summer afternoon. Even with her telescope, she couldn't quite make out their camp site. Nor was she able, as she had expected, to glimpse what lay beyond Devil-gut. The jumble of brushy gorges seemed to stretch away for ever, with even her familiar friend of the meadow, Linger Creek, disappearing immediately.

However, Janie wasn't disappointed. It's all so beautiful, she thought, like a picture. Seeking familiar landmarks, she swung the telescope across the brown slope of Breadloaf, past Miner's Gap and the lightning-blasted oak that guarded the mouth of that rocky defile, and slowly around to the serrated crags of Black Ridge. She had nearly completed the circle when she halted in surprise.

Seeing no one and hearing nothing, Janie had believed herself to be alone in the wilderness. But she had been mistaken. Almost directly above her, on a ledge of Black Ridge, two men were standing. They were close enough for her toy telescope, weak as it was, to bring both their faces clearly into view. Neither was a stranger; she had met both of them during the past week and knew vaguely who they were.

Delighted, Janie waved her arm to attract their attention, since neither appeared to be aware of her presence below them. She opened her mouth to shout a greeting. And then

she stopped with a sudden cold realization of what she was seeing.

One of the men had a rifle. And he was pointing it at the other.

The old man was facing death. He could see it in the nervous flickering eyes of the man with the gun, and in the expressionless steel eye of the rifle that was staring at his body. He felt his own eyes wetting with fear and he was ashamed. To be scared of a crazy young crackpot . . .

"No need to point no gun at me," the old man said. The red bandanna around his scrawny throat bobbed with his Adam's apple. "I didn't mean no harm."

The man with the rifle thought, in the grip of his rage, how easy it would be. The slightest pressure of his finger against the trigger, no more effort than that, and the rifle would do the rest. The bullet, spiralling down the barrel, would rip through the faded plaid shirt and bury its retribution in the ebony chest, stilling the sneering laugh for ever. The thought gave him a little shudder of pleasure.

The entire tableau—for that was how he suddenly perceived it, looking at himself from somewhere outside himself—pleased him. Standing on the ridge above the world, himself in complete power, the cringing old man at his mercy began to represent the evils that had plagued him all his life. He had had these inner rages before, these convulsions of hate, but always in the privacy of his office or bedroom where he could do no more than squeeze a death-grip on the arms of his chair, or sometimes smash his fist down on to his desk or his bed. No one else knew about these raw edges of his soul, of course; he was proud of how little other people knew about him—yet how astutely he saw through all of them and their cheap subterfuges and plots against him.

And how different this time was! For in his hands he held a weapon.

His implacable silence—he liked to think of himself as implacable—was frightening the old fool even more. Now he was rubbing his palms against the pockets of his jeans in a slow circular movement as if to dry the sweat of terror. “I was only joking,” the old man said. “I didn’t figure you’d take it to heart.”

Heart? He had no heart. He was implacable, remorseless, in complete control of himself. He said, “You shouldn’t have nagged me.”

The old man seemed surprised at the choice of words. “‘Nagged’? That’s what women do. I was just joshing you—I wasn’t laughing *at* you. It was just in fun, man to man.”

“So now we’re equals. I’m extremely flattered. I’d gathered that you considered yourself my superior.”

The old man faltered, picking his words carefully to avoid offending further. “I wasn’t trying to make trouble, just meant to be neighbourly. Maybe my advice ain’t no good, nor my jokes neither. But I don’t want trouble, got enough already.”

The rifle eye continued to gaze at its prey. “Maybe you should have thought of that before you kept following me around picking at me.” But he was no longer so certain that he would shoot. The old pest deserved a bullet for his sneers and know-it-all airs, but there was also a great satisfaction in watching him crawl. Maybe it was better that way, that he should live and remember his humiliation rather than die and forget.

The old man like a cornered animal, sensed the lessening of the danger. He stopped wiping his palms on his trouser legs. “I won’t bother you no more, if that’s what you want.” He commenced to sidle away along the ledge, slowly, to make it appear—to himself, at least—that he was merely leaving, not running.

Let him go, the man with the rifle decided. He's learned his lesson. He knows how close he came. Let him go.

But then, at the lip of the trail that led downwards to the flat, the old man paused. Perhaps it was that same need to persuade himself that he was not running away that made him hesitate, a desire to have the last word and thus rescue his pride. Over his shoulder he said, "If I was you, mister, I'd see a doctor."

The fury returned in a red flood, deeper than before, engulfing him. The old fool hadn't learned his lesson, after all. All right, let him learn it now. His finger jerked convulsively against the trigger of the rifle.

The shot was not loud, the noise dissipating immediately in the mountain vastness with only the faintest of echoes lingering behind. For an instant, he wasn't even sure that he had actually fired, so quickly was it over. But then he saw the old man, propelled by the force of the bullet, pitch forward and roll over and lie still. Then he knew.

His anger was gone now and a great calmness settled over him. He walked forward and stood gazing down at the fallen man without any emotion except satisfaction. No need for a closer examination; he could see that the old man was dead. Serves him right, he thought. He had been completely justified in his action. He had been badgered and ridiculed beyond endurance. No one would blame him, certainly.

Or would they?

"Self-defence," he murmured aloud. "I can say that he attacked me, tried to rob me—and since nobody say it . . ."

Or had they?

For the first time, he felt uneasy and exposed, standing on the ledge. Quickly, he turned and began to scan his surroundings. No one else on the ridge or on Breadloaf opposite or below in . . . Who was that? His stomach contracted sharply. He was not alone!

Directly below him at the edge of Chinese Flat, a small figure in a red jacket stood gazing up at him. Sunlight glinted on something she held to her eye. "My God!" he breathed. "It's a kid with a telescope!"

His next move was a reflex. Without consciously willing it, he threw the rifle to his shoulder and fired down at this unexpected witness. Even as he did so, he knew it was a mistake. The distance was too great for an unskilled marksman; there were other, better, ways to deal with a child. Perhaps she hadn't seen him shoot the old man . . . But it was already too late.

As he knew it would, his shot missed. But it was enough to stampede the child. She scrambled down from the large rock on which she stood, glancing wildly around for one terrified moment and chose the nearest shelter. Before he could fire again—or even decide if he should fire again—she had vanished into the mouth of Devilgut and was lost to his sight.

Run—run—run!

Until this moment, Janie Cooper had never experienced pure terror. Frightened she had occasionally been during her short lifetime. But it had been a momentary emotion, usually born of her over-active imagination, and quickly dispelled by the comforting presence of parent, teacher or playmate. This time it was different. This time it was not her imagination. The whine of the bullet as it passed her head had been real. And this time no one stood by to reassure her. She was alone in a hostile world.

Run!

She had no plan of escape. She only knew that she must somehow get away from the man with the gun. She chose Devilgut as her sanctuary because it offered a hiding place close at hand, where any other avenue would have left her exposed to her enemy on Black Ridge above. Had she been

capable of weighing the alternatives, had she been able to realize what a small target she was, she would have fled back across Chinese Flat to Portal Canyon and the safety of her father's camp. But in that moment panic was her master and all else—reason, her father's orders to avoid the tangled badlands—was forgotten. She plunged into Devilgut.

Run!

Janie obeyed. Panting with fear, she scurried forward over rocks and through brush, oblivious of the switching branches and the treacherous footing. Sometimes she fell but scrambled up again, paying no attention to scrapes and bruises that, under ordinary circumstances, would have produced tears. She glanced backward oftener than forward, expecting at any moment to see a shadow close behind her, reaching for her. All she saw were trees and underbrush that pressed in upon her from every side until she was not even sure in which direction lay the meadow she had left. Still, she hurried on, her panic carrying her forward at random through the labyrinth of gullies.

Exhaustion gradually overtook fear and at last she came to a halt, sinking to the ground in the shelter of a live-oak tree, unable to run farther. She sobbed noiselessly with mingled fright and weariness. She waited numbly for her enemy to find her. Long minutes passed and the only sound she heard was her own heart, thudding against her ribs. Slowly, she began to believe that she had escaped.

"He shot at me," she whispered aloud, trying to comprehend it. "He tried to kill me."

The sense of unreality she felt did not spring from a failure to understand. Television, films, comics, the front pages of the newspapers had all long before familiarized her with the idea of murder. She knew that men often killed other men and that this was against the law. Murderers, when caught, were punished and so they tried never to be seen when murdering somebody. If someone should see them, then they killed that person too.

"I'm a witness," Janie told herself with a touch of awe that she should occupy such an important position. For a moment she almost forgot her fear in a surge of pride but then she remembered the bullet that had come so close, and she shivered. I don't want to be a witness! she thought desperately. I just want to go home.

She had no doubt about what she had seen. The Old Man had been murdered by the Professor. She did not remember their names, although she had been introduced by her father, who had spoken to both of them. The Old Man was a prospector who looked for gold and silver and had a brown burro; he lived here in the mountains. She was less definite about the Professor who, like herself, was not a native of the hills. Janie understood only vaguely what a "professor" was, some sort of a teacher for grown-ups. His function seemed mysterious and menacing, in the light of what had happened.

And now the Professor was after her.

She held her breath and listened. The late afternoon breeze rustled through the branches of the oak tree and stirred the manzanita. Familiar sounds but ominous now, enough to bring back apprehension full-grown. I can't just stay here and wait, she thought. I've got to get back to Father. He'll protect me.

For the first time, she began to wonder exactly where she was in relation to their camp site. She didn't feel lost, however, for there was Linger Creek, which she had instinctively followed in her wild flight into Devilgut. All she would have to do was let it lead her back to the meadow and from there she would be on familiar ground.

But that was where the Professor was.

I've got to take another way, she decided. Let's see, if I make a circle over in that direction, I'll probably come out behind the Professor and he'll never see me. And I won't get lost because I have my compass . . .

With sudden dismay, she put her hand to her chest, seeking



the telescope that had hung there by a thong. It was gone. Then she remembered that she had taken the thong from around her neck when she stood on the big rock. Somewhere in her flight, she had dropped the telescope—and with it, of course, the compass.

"Oh darn it!" she said aloud. "What'll I do now?"

A noise down the canyon seemed to answer her. Janie didn't know what it was, perhaps only the tapping of a woodpecker, but with it came again the overpowering urge to run, to get away. I'll get along without the old compass, she told herself defiantly. She splashed across the creek and headed off along the course she had set for herself to safety.

At the mouth of Devilgut, the Professor halted. After his shot missed, he had rushed down the slope of Black Ridge with the intention of pursuing the girl. Yet by the time he reached the smooth ground of the meadow, the child had vanished, exactly where amid the jigsaw of gullies the Professor could not determine. And so he hesitated.

It occurred to him then that he was acting in a ridiculous fashion. What in the world was he, a grown man, doing chasing a small child through a wilderness? What did he intend to do when he caught her, anyway? Children could be handled by persuasion and suggestion. If she actually had seen him shoot the old man, why, it still could be explained away as an accident. No reason for him to be silly just because . . .

In the grass something glinted and he picked it up. The object was a telescope, child's size, not much more than a plaything. The girl had dropped it in her headlong flight. Thoughtfully, the Professor put it to his eye and looked upwards, at the ledge where he and the old man had been. To his dismay, the lens was more powerful than he would have guessed. Through it, he could plainly see the old man's hand as it dangled over the edge of the cliff. He even

fancied he could see the dirt beneath the ragged fingernails.

She certainly had a good view, he thought sombrely. Why, in God's name, did she have to be in this particular spot at that particular time? He had nothing against her and if . . .

He didn't want to think about the "if". He turned his gaze, and with it his thoughts, once more to the man lying dead on the ledge above. He couldn't just leave the old man there where he'd sure to be seen eventually. The body must be disposed of, hidden. Luckily, there was no scarcity of hiding places in this vast countryside.

He put the girl's telescope into his pocket and began to toil up the slope, pausing now and then to look and to listen. He saw no one and heard nothing but the incessant chatter and murmur of the forest. The child had been quite frightened, obviously; she was probably hiding somewhere in Devilgut, gathering up her courage. Very well. Just give him enough time to dispose of the old man's body before he had to face the problem of the youngster.

The body was surprisingly light, as if life itself had been the greatest part of it, and the Professor was reminded of a shed snake skin. He carried the dead man easily on his shoulders back from the edge of the cliff across broken ground until he found a spot that suited him. It was a patch of soft earth overhung by a large rock that balanced precariously upon another stone. It was some distance from the path and gave access to nowhere, making it unlikely that anyone would be attracted here. He put the body aside and with his hands began to scoop a shallow grave out of the soil.

Now and then he paused to rest and, each time, he crept back cautiously to scan the meadow and the mouth of Devilgut, half-expecting that he would see the small figure of the child emerging from her hiding place. But he did not.

At the depth of about eighteen inches, he ran into shale that defied further digging without tools. He decided it

was deep enough and placed the body within the grave, covering it quickly. Then, with an effort that made sweat stand out on his forehead, he succeeded in dislodging the balancing rock from its perch. The large stone thudded on top of the grave with a dull sound of finality. It did not cover the entire grave, but the Professor felt that it would serve the purpose.

And still he felt no remorse. Stay there, he silently commanded his victim; stay there till the end of time and the day of judgment, if there is one. No one will care. No one will miss you, with the possible exception of that mangy burro. You were nothing and you are nothing.

Later, perhaps when it was dark, he would take care of the old man's camp on Breadloaf. Not that there was much to take care of—a bedroll, a few cooking utensils, some prospecting tools . . . all easily buried. And the burro could be disposed of also, one way or another. If anyone missed the old man and thought to look for him, it would be assumed that he had drifted on like the worthless vagrant he was. No one would ever suspect that he . . .

Unless the child told what she had seen.

Hastily the Professor went back to his vantage point overlooking the meadow. The girl had not reappeared but the shadows were gathering below, making observation difficult. He descended the slope to a spot where an outcrop of granite formed a natural hiding place. There he sat down to wait. No matter what course she chose, the girl must pass within a few yards of him to return to her camp which, the Professor knew, was in Portal Canyon. He had no doubt as to her identity. There was only one child that he knew of in this part of the mountains, and he remembered her red jacket. She was the Cooper girl, Jeannie or Joanie or something like that, her father had called her.

It was just a question of time. But when—in the next minute or the next hour—the girl did appear, what did he intend to do about it? Surely, the Professor told himself,

a small child could be convinced by adult persuasion to believe what she was told, that it was a game he and the old man were playing, a joke on her—or perhaps a secret she mustn't tell anyone. Surely, it wouldn't be necessary to . . .

Yet as he waited, his hand returned again and again to stroke the cold barrel of the rifle that lay across his lap.

Matthew Cooper awoke with a start and glanced automatically at his wrist-watch. It was nearly four-thirty and he had napped considerably longer than had been his intention. It was the mountain air that made him relax, that and the lazy existence he had led during the past week, such a contrast to the usual pressure of business and city life. Even in old camping clothes he looked like the successful executive, the man with drive. He was a big man with lines of command shaping his mouth; the early grey at his temples showed silver against the fresh pink of his holiday sunburn.

Cooper yawned, regretting that the week was nearly over; in two more days he would be plunged back into the hurly-burly again. They'd had fun, Janie and he, and not the least of his regret was that returning to the city would mark more than just the end of a holiday. Janie would go with her mother—and that was proper since a girl needed her mother, everyone said so—but he would miss her intensely.

He wondered then if that really had to be the way it was. If he and Esther would each try a little harder, perhaps . . . He sighed. He had tried and he supposed Esther had too, but somehow they just kept missing each other, like people groping blindly in a fog. Only in the love each had for their daughter did they seem to make contact. That hadn't seemed enough to either of them and so they had agreed . . . yet Matthew Cooper sometimes remembered that it had not always been so. Once they had been happy together, first the two of them, then later the three of them. Where

had they taken the wrong turn that now found them so far apart, with Janie in the middle? He shook his head, finding no answer. He didn't want to think about it.

"Janie!" he called. "Getting hungry for dinner?"

He received no reply. He rose, stretching, from his cot and sauntered out of the tent. "Hey, Janie, where are you?" She was not within the camp site or its immediate vicinity. He wasn't worried, since she liked to go for little walks and he permitted it, within limits. Cooper decided he'd get started with the evening meal. If they ate early, perhaps they would walk down to Hannah Crossing later for a soda. Janie would like that.

He rummaged through their larder, got some hamburger patties from the portable ice-chest, and began to pump up pressure in the gas-vapour stove. As he did so, he kept one eye on the broad expanse of Chinese Flat, expecting at any moment to see her small figure come trotting across it towards him. She did not appear.

"Where the heck could she have gone?" he muttered to himself. "Doesn't she know it's getting late?"

He was struck with another thought. Janie was probably playing one of her pretend games and, like children often did, had forgotten time and place. He decided he'd better go after her. He put the hamburger back in the ice-chest to foil the flies and strolled up the incline that led to the meadow. At the edge of Chinese Flat he called her name, not seeing her immediately but not dismayed since the rolling ground and knee-high grass could easily hide her from his sight.

"Janie!"

Still he received no answer. He called again, louder this time, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Janie, come on back! It's dinner-time!" He listened for her response and heard only the faint echoes of his own voice.

Frowning a little, Cooper walked farther into the meadow. Where could she have gone that she would not hear him?

He had given her definite instructions and he had always been proud and confident of her obedience. Then he grinned, understanding. Janie was hiding from him and, at any moment, would spring from her place of concealment with a delighted shout. It was a game she dearly loved and Cooper humoured her, usually with a demonstration of wild surprise that both knew was not genuine. He looked covertly about for her hiding place so that he might "accidentally" walk in that direction. That little hummock over there, he decided; that's where she is.

He strolled in that direction, waiting for her to leap up and pounce upon him. But though he slowly circled the hummock, Janie did not leap up. No happy scream of "Stick 'em up!" burst upon his ears. Cooper began to get annoyed. He didn't mind humouring her, but this was getting ridiculous.

"All right, Janie!" he shouted. "I give up! You win! Come on back now!"

When even this produced no response, Cooper's irritation began to be replaced by a trace of worry. Could anything have happened to her? No, of course not. There was nothing to fear in this placid meadow. She had played there happily and safely a dozen times in the past week. The creek was nothing more than a trickle of water, not even a baby could get in trouble there. If she had hurt herself—a twisted ankle, for instance—why didn't she answer him?

This time he bellowed her name. "Janie! Where are you?" The result was the same.

Worry was growing in him now by leaps and bounds. The sunlight was fading fast; it was already gone from the meadow, and soon even the peaks would be in shadow. Where could she be? Trotting, he crossed the meadow to the mouth of Miner's Gap and called her name again. It bounced hollowly down the rocky defile, losing itself in the distance. He didn't think she had ventured into Miner's

Gap, since she had professed a distaste for the gloomy barren canyon. But that left only the meadow—and Devilgut.

She couldn't have gone there, Cooper told himself. I warned her a dozen times . . . Yet where was she? "Janie!" Could she have somehow strayed beyond earshot of his voice?

"Gun," he said suddenly. "She'd hear that."

He wheeled and ran back to camp to get it.

Matthew Cooper believed that his shouts had gone unheard, but this was not so. From his place of concealment near the mouth of Devilgut, the Professor heard them plainly. Until this moment his attention had been riveted solely upon the little girl. Although he had already known that her father was somewhere nearby, it was not until he had heard his voice and seen his figure across the broad meadow that he had actually considered Cooper as a possible source of danger.

What, he wondered, would he do if Janie Cooper should suddenly run out of Devilgut to meet her father? Kill them both? He shuddered, but his fingers tightened on the rifle in his lap.

He was spared, at least momentarily, from answering his own question as Cooper, a small figure in the distance, turned and ran back towards Portal Canyon, disappearing from the Professor's view. The Professor breathed in relief. Yet, almost immediately, he saw Cooper reappear. The man came running down the grassy length of Chinese Flat, halted near the centre of the meadow and held something above his head. The Professor jumped involuntarily as a shot rang out, followed by two more.

The Professor understood. Cooper had come to the conclusion that his daughter was lost and he was trying to signal the girl back to safety. Tensely, he waited to see what the result would be.

Cooper waited also, looking about in all directions, then fired once more. He shouted the girl's name several times. There was no answer. Cooper turned and ran off in the direction of Miner's Gap and the Professor lost sight of him among the shadows. Shortly, however, he heard two more pistol shots.

She must have run a long way into Devilgut, the Professor thought. And then it occurred to him that perhaps the child in her panicked flight had met with an accident. Perhaps he was waiting in vain and she would never come out of Devilgut. It was such a happy answer to his problem that he longed to embrace it. But his reason told him how foolhardy this would be. He couldn't leave it to chance. He had to be sure.

Slowly, he rose from his hiding place. He didn't really have any choice. If Janie wasn't coming out of Devilgut, he would have to go in and find her.

Get hold of yourself, Matthew Cooper commanded. There's nothing happened to her. You've got to figure this thing out sensibly. He realized that he was close to panic. She must be some place nearby. Did she say anything this afternoon, give him any hint to where she might have gone? For God's sake, think, man!

He was panting from the unaccustomed exertion of running, and trembling with apprehension. He forced himself to halt while he made an inventory of the possible areas into which his daughter might have wandered. The meadow, Miner's Gap, Devilgut . . . He had covered them all—nor could he believe that Janie, the model of an obedient child, had so far disobeyed his orders as to lose herself in any of the surrounding canyons. Where, then?

He was struck with an idea and with it a surge of hope. In the opposite direction, down Portal Canyon, lay the little settlement of 'Hannah Crossing. Janie had never

walked that far without him, but he had not exactly forbidden her to do so. And at lunch that day she had wished aloud for some more comic books like the ones he had bought her at the lodge. That's it! he thought excitedly. She must have walked down to Hannah Crossing and it's become dark and they won't let her come back alone. She's waiting there for me now.

The desire to believe was so strong that he did believe. That had to be the answer. It was the only one possible. He began to walk rapidly down the trail towards Hannah Crossing. A moment later, despite his shortness of breath, he was running.

The last orange rim of the sun slid behind the mountains. All her prayers had not been enough to prevent it and now she was alone in a wilderness of night. Janie Cooper began to cry.

She knew now what she had not admitted to herself as long as the friendly sun was there to comfort her. Her plan of circling through Devilgut and reaching safety had miscarried. She didn't know where she was. Every gorge, every tree, every rock looked strange and at the same time similar to every other gorge, tree and rock. She didn't know in which direction she was heading or in which direction she should be heading.

Janie Cooper was scared. Janie Cooper was lost.

THURSDAY NIGHT

"I'm lost," Alys Hoffman declared with a sigh. "Absolutely lost. From now on I'm going to stick to abstract. Realism is much harder." She held up the poster on which she was working. "Does that look like a ham sandwich to you, Gib?"

The lanky young man lounging across the table from her gave the painting only a cursory glance. "I guess so." He fiddled with the broad-brimmed hat perched on his knee. It had the same well-worn look as his blunt deeply tanned face; both showed the rigours of an outdoor existence and Gib Scott was not known as the neatest man in the forestry service. His badge needed polishing where it hung from the pocket of his khaki shirt and the green whipcord of his uniform trousers bore bush stains. Only his fresh-oiled boots showed care—leather-laced eight-inch logger boots. His tall body was thin to the point of gauntness. "You still haven't given me any reason, Alys."

Alys didn't answer him directly. She studied the poster, frowning. "Perhaps a little bit more white . . . I wish Dad hadn't waited until my next-to-last evening to mention he wanted new signs for the lunch counter. Just because I happen to be an art major doesn't mean I don't need a little time to——"

"I would appreciate a reason or two," Gib interrupted. His voice showed an edge of annoyance. "I don't think it's too much to expect."

"Gib, don't shout. Do you want everyone to hear you?" She motioned with her head towards the far end of the big lodge, where a couple sat at the lunch counter, drinking beer and chatting with the man behind the bar.

"It's only the Laughlins and your father. I'm not ashamed of anything."

"Well, neither am I," snapped Alys. She was a pretty girl, high-cheeked and wide-mouthed, with glossy blonde hair. She was small enough to look trim in the blue jeans and wool shirt she wore to-night but her young shapeliness allowed no doubts as to her femininity. "Yet I don't see any point in broadcasting my personal affairs all over the whole Murray Forest. I've already said that I can't marry you, Gib—so let's let it go at that, shall we?"

"I'd just like the reason," said Gib stubbornly.

"I don't have to give any reason. But—oh, all right. Look around you, Gib. That's the reason."

Gib did, as if expecting to see something he had failed to notice before. "Looks all right to me." The room in which they sat was the combination general store, lunch counter and post office that—with the kitchen and bedroom attached behind—comprised Al's Place. It was an ancient structure (some of the deer heads on the walls were older than either Gib or Alys) and the stone fireplace was dark with the smoke of several generations. The furniture was old, too, and rustic; only the gaudy jukebox which played for Saturday night dances gave any indication of modernity. The air smelled, though not unpleasantly, of aged wood and pine needles and quick-order cooking.

"Of course, it looks all right to you," Alys said. "That's just the point. And I'm sure if I took you outside, you'd say the same thing about all of Hannah Crossing."

"Maybe I would. Why not? Sure, Hannah Crossing's no great shakes——"

"That's the understatement of the year. Perhaps the

century. Hannah Crossing has never been anything and never will be anything except a wide spot in the road, and not even the main road. I've spent too much of my life here already."

In her urge to justify herself, Alys Hoffman was doing Hannah Crossing an injustice. Once it had been a busy settlement with a certain amount of economic and social importance, springing up at the junction of two overland trails and becoming a headquarters for a horde of gold-seekers. It had been named for the wife of one of these pioneers, who had moved on with the others when the cost of mining the gold became greater than its value. But the gold was still in the ground and Hannah Crossing was still on the map, although the highway now rushed by a mile to the west. All that remained of the once bustling community was a petrol pump, the ranger station and Al's Place—a convenient command post for holiday campers and weekend prospectors.

"I'm not asking you to marry Hannah Crossing," Gib said. "I'm asking you to marry me."

"It amounts to the same thing. You like it here. You admit it."

"Your Dad's been here quite a while. It must agree with him."

Alys lowered her voice. "Dad bought the lodge because of Mother's health. That's the only reason—and even that didn't help. He's stayed on because . . . well, you know how Dad is."

Gib looked over his shoulder at Alys' father. Both father and daughter shared the same given name—Allison—but each had shortened it to his liking. Al Hoffman was a burly balding man of fifty, a discontented schemer whose ambitions would for ever outstrip his perseverance. As usual, he was complaining, this time to Fell and Martha Laughlin, about the poor summer, now nearly over. As usual, Hoffman had an explanation:

"It's that damn irrigation district," he was saying. "I could have told them when they let the lake dry up just what would happen. The doves are going somewhere else and so are the hunters. So who suffers? Us poor fools who depend on the public's trade, that's who."

"Deer season's coming," said Fell Laughlin, sipping his beer. He was a raw-boned middle-aged rancher, who ran sheep on the other side of the highway. "You'll make a killing then."

"Yeah?" Hoffman said dourly. "I hear that Big Ben's back. He'll drive all the deer clear into the next county, wait and see."

"Why doesn't somebody go out and hunt him down?" Mrs. Laughlin asked. "We've lost close to a dozen sheep to that lion."

Her husband shrugged. "Big Ben's a pretty smart cat, and he doesn't come often. I guess nobody's really gone at it serious."

"Might do it myself," Hoffman said. "What's the bounty on cougars now? Still fifty dollars for a male?"

"Of course," said Fell Laughlin, "I got to admit I've always had a sneaking admiration for Big Ben. You always got to admire a champ. If he'd only stay on his own side of the mountain . . ."

"What I should really do is get rid of this place," Hoffman mused. "With a little cash, there's a dozen deals I could swing, really get somewhere . . ."

At the other end of the room, Alys said to Gib, "That's what I mean. Dad's always talking about getting somewhere, but he never will. He's too old now to do anything except talk. But it's not going to happen to me. I've got one more year up at UCLA. Then I'll have the insurance money Mother left me and, well, maybe I'll go abroad—Paris—and study art. Or something."

"What's so great about Paris?"

"It's different!" Alys cried in exasperation. "Can't you

understand that? Why should I stay here and wear blue jeans the rest of my life?"

"Setting up our own home is a pretty important reason," Gib said doggedly. "Of course, if you don't love me . . . but I haven't heard you say that, Alys."

Alys hesitated, then shrugged. "Oh, love! Don't be so immature. We're not fifteen any longer."

"I think you had more sense when you were fifteen. Before your father filled you with all his ridiculous ideas about being somebody and going somewhere."

"And what do you think the idea of marrying you is?" Alys flared. "It's not just ridiculous, it's appalling. Who do you think you are, anyway?"

Gib flushed. "You know the answer to that."

"Yes, I do. And since you want the real reason that I wouldn't consider marrying you—even if I loved you, which I don't—it's this I wouldn't want to be second choice to your precious mountains. They've always been first choice to you, Gib, ever since you were a kid. People don't really matter to you as long as you've got your job. It's all right with me if you want to hide here in the back of nowhere and never do anything important and never be anything except an overgrown Boy Scout. But don't ask me to share it with you, because I've got better things to do."

She stopped, a little ashamed at having said more than she intended in the spurt of anger. For an instant, she almost wished that he would reach across the table and strike her for her cruelty, force her to admit she didn't really mean the cutting words. She had never seen his face so cold and bleak. But he didn't move or speak and her sense of shame was replaced by a feeling of self-righteousness and even a little contempt. He asked for it, she thought; he deserved it.

Gib took his hat off his knee. "Have a good time in Paris," he said, rising. "I hope they teach you how to paint the best ham sandwich in the world."

Alys watched his rigid back as he strode for the door and she was conscious of a strange sinking feeling that she couldn't understand. She half-raised her hand with the intention of calling him back, but at that moment the screen door banged and a man stepped into the lodge. The newcomer was breathing hard as if he had been running. Alys recognized him as the Mr. Cooper who, together with his daughter, had been camping in Portal Canyon, but she was too engrossed with her own conflicting emotions to wonder at the distraught expression on his face.

"Is she here?" Cooper asked in a loud voice. At the counter Al Hoffman and the Laughlins swung around to regard him curiously. "Is Janie here?"

No one answered for a moment and then Hoffman came from behind the counter. "Who? You mean your little girl?"

"Yes," Cooper said eagerly, his chest still heaving with exertion. "Janie. She's here, isn't she?"

Hoffman shook his head. "Not that I know of."

"But she has been here? You've seen her?"

"Not to-day."

At the frozen look of fear that engulfed Cooper's countenance, Alys rose and came forward. "Mr. Cooper—what is it? Don't you know where Janie is?"

"No," he whispered, staring at her. "I can't find her. She's lost."

Gib had been standing with his hand on the door, ready to leave. Now he let it close as the sudden exclamations ran around the group. "Lost? Where? Are you sure?" The Laughlins got up from their seats at the counter so that everyone in the room was on his feet. And Alys noted with a trace of surprise how all their glances turned automatically towards the man at the door.

Gib said quietly, "Let's hear about it." He guided Cooper to the nearest chair. Cooper sat down suddenly as

if his legs wouldn't hold him any longer. "How long has your daughter been missing?"

"I don't know," Cooper muttered. "I thought sure I'd find her here."

"Where did you see her last?"

"At the camp. This afternoon. I was taking a nap—I know I should never have closed my eyes—but she said she was going to pick flowers. When I woke up I couldn't find her. I called and called but she didn't come."

"This was before sunset?" Cooper nodded and Gib looked at his watch. "At least an hour," he murmured. He told Al Hoffman, "Get him a drink." The older man hesitated and Gib said without smiling, "I mean from the bottle you keep under the bar, Al." Hoffman grinned shamefacedly and went to get it. Gib studied the seated man for a moment. "Now listen to me, Mr. Cooper. I know you're frightened but there's no use going into a spin. How old's your girl—ten? Well, she's no infant. She can't have wandered far in the time she's been gone. She may have fallen asleep and she's probably waiting right now for somebody to come and get her."

Cooper nodded heavily, gaining more comfort from the ranger's reassuring tone than from the whisky that Hoffman poured him. "I hope you're right. But she's never been lost before—and when it got dark . . ." He tried to smile. "I guess I sort of went to pieces."

"I think the best thing you can do is catch up your breath and then hike on back to your camp. Build a big bonfire, something Janie will be able to see from a distance. I'll ride out and look for her. I know this country pretty well."

"Thanks," said Cooper. "Thank God you were here."

"Don't worry. We'll find her."

There was a wall telephone at the far end of the lodge, next to the jukebox. Gib patiently held the receiver to his ear until the operator finally plugged in. "Five Oaks

2J, please." That was the nearest sheriff's sub-station. He reported briefly the circumstances and asked the night deputy to alert the highway patrol, in case the missing girl should intersect the main road in her wandering.

Fell Laughlin was at his elbow when he hung up. "Want my help, Gib? Martha can get home alone."

"I'll take all the help I can get. Thanks, Fell."

Laughlin lowered his voice so it wouldn't carry to the other end of the room where the missing girl's father sat. "How does it look to you?"

"At this stage, there's no way to tell. We can hope for the best. But it's a big country."

Alys Hoffman had come up in time to hear the last of the low-voiced conversation. She had approached a trifle timidly in remembrance of the quarrel but what she heard drove it from her mind. "I don't understand," she said, startled. "You told Mr. Cooper there was nothing to worry about."

Gib regarded her levelly. "I guess it was my Boy Scout good deed for the day," he said at last. "How would you have handled it?"

He didn't wait for her answer. He strode for the door and Fell Laughlin followed him.

The racoon slipped nimbly into the crevice between two boulders, barely avoiding the desperate swipe of the razor-sharp claws. Big Ben growled deep in his throat with angry disappointment and sat down on his haunches to consider his next move.

Big Ben was hungry, extremely so, or he would not have wasted his time on stalking the little racoon, an animal he generally scorned. But it had been a dry year and the deer—his favourite prey—had not come in their customary numbers. He had gone five days without a kill and hunger was gnawing insistently at his stomach.

Actually, Big Ben was getting old. He was nearly ten. He appeared as formidable as ever, over eight feet in length and weighing two hundred and fifty pounds. But he moved more slowly now and his teeth were worn and blunt, no longer possessing their former killing sharpness. Over half of the animals he stalked escaped him and he had even been reduced during the past week to chasing mice and devouring snails. For a cougar used to feasting on half a deer at one meal, these were meagre times.

However, aged though he was, Big Ben was still the unchallenged king of the mountains. No animal, including man, could match the power concealed in his heavy shoulders or excel him in his cunning as a stalker of game. His reddish coat, now beginning to change in colour towards the brown of winter, blended well with the undergrowth of canyon and hillside, and his large padded paws bore him almost soundlessly. His scream—its unusual volume had won him his name—was still awe-inspiring, the O-O-O, repeated three times in succession. A piercing call, it could carry for miles across the wilderness, farther than any other forest sound. Even gunshots would be swallowed up by the foliage or baffled by the ridges, but not Big Ben's voice.

His usual hunting grounds were among the peaks and canyons beyond Faro Valley, with occasional forays farther east to the edge of the desert. Only rarely did he venture in the opposite direction, for he was a great creature of habit.

But the deer had not come and Big Ben was hungry and deep in his mind was a cloudy recollection of eating sheep at some distant spot to the west. It was there that he was headed when, in the depths of Devilgut, he had paused to stalk the racoon unsuccessfully.

Big Ben padded around the heap of tumbled rocks where his quarry had disappeared, but found no way to reach him. He was about to turn away when the breeze brought

a new scent to his nostrils. An unmistakable enemy scent. The human scent.

By instinct, Big Ben knew that his enemy was not a proper food. In the past he had always avoided man, except on certain well-fed sporting occasions when he had come upon a solitary hunter and stalked the unsuspecting human being along a trail, simply to see what this queer animal was up to. The size of a cat does not limit its curiosity. But tonight Big Ben was hungry, and in neither a sightseeing nor playful mood. He was hungry enough to overcome his instinctive prudence.

Silently, slipping from shadow to shadow like a lean and tawny ghost, he began to stalk his new prey in earnest.

Earl Restibo had been sworn into the sheriff's department in a bygone day when salaries were low and the height regulation was passed over if the recruit looked tough enough. He was an ex-wrestler, short and squat with the placid pop-eyed expression of a bullfrog. As chief deputy for the Encanto division, with a plain-clothes prerogative, he dressed to suit his personality in a black serge suit, his star badge pinned on a vest pocket.

He heard of Janie Cooper for the first time on his car radio. The official message that crackled over the vehicle's loud speaker was not directed at him but was a relay to the highway patrol, advising the state officers to be on the lookout for a missing child.

It had nothing to do with him but Restibo slowed his sedan, his eyes squinting into a thoughtful scowl. He was on his way to pick up a drunken Indian who had got himself jailed at Five Oaks, and to return him to the reservation. A routine night's work, one he had done more times than he could remember in the twenty years he had been a deputy. He was even pretty sure who the Indian was, at least within a circle of three or four. Next week, he would have it to

do over again, just as he could predict how many wrecks there would be on Bowker Grade the coming week-end. It all seemed as regular as the tides, a pattern he knew as well as he knew his name. Restibo did not find the pattern frustrating, however. It was his job and he did it.

And though a missing child was also part of the pattern, Restibo had an instinct for the occasional incident that was something more. It was something he could explain, but all good lawmen developed it, an ability to know without reason when real trouble existed and, in some cases, even to anticipate it. It was this intuition working that caused him to scowl.

Restibo knew what no one else yet knew and that was that the lost girl had not come upon the highway. He knew this because he had just driven it. And since he was familiar with the pattern, he did not have to be told the corollary: the child was in grave danger. True, it was officially none of his business; he had not been summoned or dispatched on this matter. But his cop instinct told him where he should be.

The turning to Hannah Crossing loomed up in his headlights. Restibo swung his car on to it and pushed down on the accelerator. The Indian could wait. A few hours in jail might do him some good, anyway.

He was nearly within sight of Hannah Crossing when the radio erupted to life, calling his signal. He picked up the receiver. "Restibo, Car 69."

"Proceed to Hannah Crossing immediately and investigate report of missing child. Acknowledge."

"Okay," Restibo said. "Will do." As he replaced the receiver on its hook, he turned into the parking space beside Al's Place.

As he reached the mouth of Miner's Gap, Gib Scott swung around in the saddle and stared back the way he had come.

He could see the bonfire plainly, marking the Cooper Camp, and he felt satisfied that if the child were anywhere nearby she would be able to use it as a homing beacon.

The fire roared higher as he watched and Gib decided he had done the right thing to leave Fell Laughlin with the distraught father. Laughlin could be counted on to keep the bonfire to a controllable size; it wouldn't do to set the forest ablaze just to find a wandering girl.

Just to find a wandering girl! . . . Now why had he put it that way? Gib wondered—as if it didn't really matter very much. The memory of what Alys had said came back to rankle, that he cared more for mountains than for people. He didn't like to think that was true because it didn't suit his picture of how he'd prefer to be. All the same he couldn't quite dodge the accusation. Suppose, he tested himself, you had to choose between finding Janie Cooper and burning down the forest—which would it be? On one hand there was the preciousness of a young and innocent human life, the grief of parents, the blighting of hope. On the other, the ravishment of the earth, the destruction of timber and water-shed, the death of thousands of animals and birds. One life against all that, ten years against a hundred or more.

For crying out loud, Gib told himself angrily, stop it! Just because Alys walked all over your feelings to-night, don't start imagining things. You're not living in a Greek tragedy, you're just out looking for a strayed child. There's no choice involved and even if there were. . . . Yes? his conscience prompted.

"Forget it!" he said aloud and his horse increased its pace slightly in response to his tone. The trail meandered upwards gradually towards the summit of Breadleaf and the animal needed only an occasional light pressure on the reins to find his way. Gib sat easily in the saddle, adjusting his body automatically to the various changes in direction and angle, until at last they emerged on to relatively level ground

at the top. From there, the bonfire in Portal Canyon stood out vividly in the blackness below and Gib thought he could detect the figures of the two men standing beside it. It had been nice of Fell Laughlin to volunteer when it really wasn't any concern of his, but Fell was a nice guy, someone you could count on.

That made him think again of Alys. Subconsciously, he had counted on her too, although he had never really put it into words before to-night. That had probably been a mistake but a natural one, since they had more or less grown up together and he had assumed she would feel the same as he. Well, he'd been wrong. She didn't feel the same as he about anything—particularly about Gib Scott. It was a blow to discover that she not only didn't love him, she didn't even like him very well. He had offered her his world; she had spurned it. And Saturday she would be gone into another world—her world—where he could not follow, even if he wished. At the lodge, he had bade her a curt farewell but Gib discovered, as all rejected lovers have discovered, that forgetting her would be another matter.

His horse pricked up its ears and immediately from the darkness nearby came the welcoming bray of a burro. Gib put his bleak thoughts aside and, cupping his hands to his mouth, shouted, "Hey, Ritchie, show a light! It's me—Scott!"

He got no answer. Gib kicked his horse forward and rode around the stand of scrub oak and mesquite to where Ritchie's camp was pitched in its lee. This was his destination, the reason he had climbed Breadloaf, but it had been a wasted journey. The old prospector was not there. Gib dismounted and used his torch to investigate. Ritchie's bedroll, tools, and cooking utensils were all in place, and his burro was tethered to an oak tree, but of Ritchie himself there was no sign.

"Where could the old buzzard be?" Gib muttered. He had counted on enlisting the prospector's aid in the search—

he had even harboured a hope that Janie Cooper herself might be found here—and he was properly chagrined at the double failure. He didn't care much personally for the sly old man but Ritchie knew the mountains, even better than Gib himself.

Gib poked the ashes of the camp fire. They were old and dead, probably no more recent than breakfast. Yet the burro, tethered and unable to forage, argued that Ritchie didn't intend to be gone for long. There didn't seem to be any point in waiting for him, though, since he might be sleeping out somewhere and not return until daylight.

Gib untied the burro and used the tether to hobble the beast instead. The burro wandered off a few paces and began to graze on a clump of mountain mahogany. Gib tore a page from his note-book and composed a short note to the prospector, asking him to be on the lookout for the missing child. He impaled the paper on the handle of a skillet and left it next to the bed-roll.

As he did so, the silence of the mountain was suddenly broken by a shrill and piercing sound, a mournful scream that was repeated once and then again. Gib, momentarily startled, grinned as he recognized the eerie wail. That's Big Ben, as sure as you're horn, he thought, and back on our side of the mountain, too. Over near Devilgut from the sound of it. That's bad news for Fell Laughlin.

It didn't occur to him that it might be bad news for Janie Cooper, too.

The three of them were silent, listening, but the scream did not come again. "Sounds almost as if he's in the next room," commented Restibo. "How close do you think he is?"

"Oh, couple of miles, anyway," Al Hoffman told him authoritatively. "Sound travels a long way on a still night

like this, and Big Ben's got a powerful voice. Two miles, maybe farther."

Alys shuddered. "I don't like it. Why did Big Ben have to show up around here to-night of all nights?" They were standing on the lodge porch and had been ever since Restibo's arrival, as if expecting something to happen any moment that would require their immediate action. Around them swirled a shifting cloud of moths and millers, seeking to reach the light that shone out through the screen door.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," Restibo said. "If you're thinking of the little girl—Gib told me once that the big cats won't attack humans."

Alys shrugged impatiently. "Gib Scott doesn't know everything."

"He knows his job," Restibo demurred mildly. He studied Alys. "I thought you and Gib were rather particular friends."

"Just friends," Alys said sharply. She regretted revealing any portion of her feelings to the deputy, especially when it seemed to put her in a bad light. She switched the subject away from Gib. "Oh, why can't we find out something?"

"We will," Hoffman said, and Alys wished her father wouldn't sound so pompously sure of himself. "These things take time. I know."

"I can't help feeling that I'm the one to blame," Alys said. "I was the one who told Janie about the wild flowers at the far end of Chinese Flat. We were talking yesterday about flowers and how much we both liked them, and she was saying how there aren't any at this time of year. So I told her about that patch of deerweed that always blooms out along the Linger. I even suggested that she have her father take her up there. Oh, I shouldn't have told her, or I should have told Mr. Cooper too! If she wandered up there by herself and got lost in Devilgut . . ."

"Now, now," cautioned her father, "don't go taking the

world on your shoulders, sugar. It's not your responsibility."

"I can't help how I feel."

"My guess is that she'll probably find herself," Restibo said. "Most lost persons do. Even if she doesn't, well, somebody else will. Gib's out already and in the morning I can get a search team combing the hills." He peered off into the darkness. "Wish I'd got here before Gib took off. Sure would like his opinion on a couple of things."

"Isn't there anything you can do now?" Alys demanded. She nearly added, "without Gib" but checked herself. She knew she was more upset about the situation than the present facts demanded but she told herself that it was because she felt some responsibility for the little girl. That was it; it wasn't because of Gib Scott at all.

"I guess I might hike up Portal Canyon and talk to the father," Restibo mused. "She may even be home safe by now. What's this Cooper's first name?"

"Matthew," Hoffman said. "Matthew J."

"Matthew Cooper," echoed Restibo and then he looked at Hoffman sharply. "Not Matt Cooper?"

"I guess so. What about it?"

"Matt Cooper," Restibo said softly. "Cooper Corporation. You mean it's Matt Cooper's little girl who's lost?"

The name had a vague familiar ring to Alys but her father evidently knew it well. "Good lord!" he exclaimed. "So that's who he is—and I never even connected him with . . . Of course, he did act like money didn't mean a thing—the other day he bought a flock of steaks off me and didn't even ask how much but——"

Restibo said, "I think I'd better use your phone." He went into the lodge and they could hear him speaking to the operator.

"Think of that!" Hoffman said, pacing around the porch excitedly. "It's *the* Matt Cooper, one of the biggest men

in Southern California, and he's been right there all week. Alys, that man could buy and sell us a dozen times over just out of his pocket money."

"For goodness sakes, Dad, stop walking up and down. I'm nervous enough already."

"But this is a big thing, sugar." Hoffman rubbed his jaw speculatively. He added, almost to himself, "Or it could be."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Just thinking. Got to keep things in perspective, you know." Hoffman put an arm around his daughter. "You do the same, sugar. If that ranger has got you upset——"

"He hasn't."

"Well, don't let him. I was watching you to-night, Alys, and I was proud of the way you handled him. You did the right thing. Imagine you settling down here when you've got so much on the ball—and with somebody like him who'll never amount to anything. You're like me, you're cut out for better things and one of these days——"

"Oh, Dad, stop talking about it." Alys said angrily, shaking off his arm. "I told you Gibb hasn't anything to do with the way I feel. I'm just worried about Janie, out there alone in the dark. So many things could have happened to her. She could have fallen or maybe she got bitten by a rattler or—well, there's even Big Ben. What if he were terribly hungry?"

"He isn't hungry," Hoffman said. "That's why he screamed."

"Thanks," Alys said sarcastically. "That makes me feel much better."

As usual, sarcasm was lost on her father. He patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Good. This is going to turn out fine, just you wait and see. I wonder if Restibo is through with the phone yet?"

He went into the lodge, leaving Alys alone on the dark porch with the night insects. I wish I had his confidence,

she thought, and even in the midst of her concern it occurred to her to wonder what had changed a dyed-in-the-wool pessimist into such a blithe optimist.

Sheriff Hank Thoreau replaced the receiver and sat considering what Restibo had told him. In the living-room of his downtown apartment, the television was excitedly blaring out the final minutes of the roller Derby, but Thoreau wasn't conscious of the din.

Matt Cooper's daughter was lost in the mountains. What a break, he thought, what a wonderful break! He could see the headlines in his mind already. SHERIFF RESCUES LOST COOPER CHILD . . .

In reacting with delight rather than concern at the news, Thoreau was not being consciously heartless. If someone had been present to remonstrate with him, his answer would have been, "Of course, it's a shame the kid's lost, and I'll find her, no fear of that. But since there is a kid lost—and it wasn't my fault, after all—why shouldn't I be glad it's Matt Cooper's girl? It'll be a big thing for my office, page one stuff all the way, and we can sure use some good publicity with our budget coming up before the county supervisors next month . . ." Sheriff Hank Thoreau was an opportunist.

His enemies preferred to call him a pompous ass, but they were mistaken. It was, in fact, easy to underestimate Thoreau. It was true that he possessed only limited ability as a lawman and the city police regarded him with open scorn. But sheriff was an elective office and Thoreau had one vital qualification: he was able to get himself elected. He might be weak on police procedure but his feel for public relations left nothing to be desired. And it was public relations that year after year gave him a fat budget and the county a well-paid graft-free sheriff's department. The picture he assiduously presented to the voters was that of Hank

Thoreau, bluff and capable, cut from the mould of the old-time peace officers. He had cultivated a drawl and his clothes were Western cut—though not enough to appear ridiculous—and he used Hank rather than his given name of Henry. Of his namesake, the sheriff knew nothing except that he had been a writer, a poet, he thought; he had never read him. He often wished that he had a less foreign-looking surname, which is why he stressed the Hank.

Let's see, he thought, his sense of public relations at a full gallop, what's the best way to handle this? Call out the posse, of course . . . The Sheriff's Mounted Posse was his special pride and joy, fifty trained deputies whose matched palominos and dashing horsemanship was the highlight of every county parade and celebration. Exponents of efficiency could argue that the posse absorbed a greater share of the department budget than they were worth but Thoreau knew the value of showmanship. A deputy on a horse was more impressive to the voter than a deputy in a squad car. But unlike the usual breed of Western metropolitan sheriffs, Thoreau led his parades while waving his hat from the rear seat of a convertible. He was canny enough to realize that he cut no figure at all on a horse. He was strictly a city product.

His wife came into the bedroom as he finished telephoning his office. "You missed the best part," she complained. "The Blue Devils scored three points in the last jam and it ended in a real free-for-all." She was a buxom redhead, considerably younger than her husband, with a pretty but dissatisfied face.

"Something important's come up, Bobbie." He rummaged in the cupboard for his fringed leather jacket. "Got to take a run up to the mountains."

"At this time of night? You're kidding."

"There's a girl lost." He added casually, "Happens to be Matt Cooper's daughter."

The name didn't mean anything to her. She said petu-

lantly, "I don't see why you should have to go. I'll be all alone."

"Matt Cooper's daughter," Thoreau repeated patiently. "He's Cooper Corporation, you know, that outfit out on the mesa that's doing all the electronic work for the Air Force. Radar, guided missiles. He's a big man, Bobbie. I figure I better handle this myself—for the sake of appearances."

She shrugged. "Okay. When'll you be back?"

"Hard to say. Day or so, I guess."

"Well, just don't forget that you promised to take Mother and me to the rodeo, Sunday."

"Gee," Thoreau muttered, "I forgot all about that." The annual Charity Rodeo was one of the most important events on his calendar, even more so than the New Year's Day parade. Thoreau was grand marshal and, equally as vital, the mounted posse was the principal attraction. The rodeo was only two days away—and what if the search for the child should run into difficulties and stretch out to the week-end? That could present a real dilemma. For an instant, he considered calling his office again and rescinding his order, but he discarded the idea. It might arouse talk and he didn't want that.

There was another answer. He didn't care much for that, either, since it meant dividing the credit. Search and rescue . . . Thoreau reacted with the typical Southern California mind. Southern California faces the sea and its rescues are performed by the Coast Guard. He dialled the number of the Coast Guard station and asked for the helicopter squadron.

• She didn't know which way she was going but the urge to keep moving was all-consuming. Several times she had decided to stop, to sit down and wait for someone to find her. But each time she did so, she found it impossible. The strangeness of her surroundings, the hostile darkness of the

night, the unidentifiable noises—and, even worse, the occasional complete silence—combined to bring her to her feet and send her wandering on again.

She had never realized that so many birds came out at night. Above her, and on all sides, they sang and called and screeched or simply made frightening rustling sounds among the leaves. There were other noises near her feet as invisible creatures scampered out of her way, making her afraid that her next step would land on something squishy or something with fangs. A coyote howled on some distant hill and she thought about larger fangs, gleaming in the gloom, waiting. "Please," she whispered helplessly. "Please don't let me see anything."

Every time she was switched across the face, she worried about poison oak. Her father had taught her to recognize and to avoid the three-pronged leaves of the terrible vine, but how could she keep away from it in the dark? She'd had a mild case of poison oak once—when one of her teachers had innocently decorated the school room with it at Thanksgiving—and her eyes had swollen shut. What if it happened again, and she was left wandering out here totally blind? What if she got a bad case and swelled up and died? "Please . . ."

Janie's progress was slow. She was clumsy with fatigue and the darkness was her foe, placing unseen rocks and branches and pot-holes in her path to plague her. She was hungry. But, above all, she was thirsty.

And so it was with a sense of relief that made her whimper that she stumbled across an old friend. Sliding down a bank of shale, she found her feet in water, the shallows of a lazily moving stream. I'm all right now, she told herself delightfully; I've come back to Linger Creek. Using her hands as a scoop, she gulped in mouthfuls of the cold water, gaining in confidence with each swallow. Her thirst satisfied, she sat down to reason out her next move, forcing herself to examine each step so that there would be no chance of mistake. Now

let's see, she thought, I know that Linger Creek runs across the meadow and right beside our camp. So if I follow the creek, it will take me home, almost right away.

In this, Janie was both right and wrong. She was right in her deductions regarding Linger Creek. She was wrong, however, in her basic assumption. The stream she had come across was not Linger Creek. It was a tributary, one of several in Devilgut that fed into Linger, called Coachella Creek. And while Coachella eventually joined forces with Linger it was by a long and circuitous route mostly at right-angles to Janie's goal.

She set out along the bank of the wrong creek with considerable confidence, a confidence that was heightened by finding easier walking. There even appeared to be something resembling a trail here and she pushed along it more rapidly, stumbling only occasionally.

She had been walking for about fifteen minutes, expecting momentarily to see Chinese Flat before her when she was suddenly startled by a sound from the direction she had come. It was the sound of a horse's hooves, clinking on rock.

For the past few hours, the enormity of being lost in the wilderness had been enough to erase from her mind the reason she had become lost in the first place. The murder, the terrifying figure of the Professor, the danger to her own life . . . these had receded into the background. At the realization that someone was close behind her, fear came back in a rush.

There was no doubt in Janie's mind who was on her trail. The Professor had followed her somehow. He was going to kill her! Her eyes darted here and there, trying to penetrate the darkness in search of a hiding place. As she hesitated, she heard the horse again, closer now, close enough to distinguish the creak of saddle leather.

Janie chose what was closest to hand, a thicket of greasewood scarcely a yard from the stream bed. She threw herself

on the bank beside it and wriggled into the network of needled limbs, heedless of scratches. The limber branches fought her but she forced them aside and lay frozen in their grasp.

Almost immediately she saw the glow of a light and a moment later glimpsed through the foliage the figure of a horse and its rider approaching along the creek. She could not see the man's face but she did not need to. From the way he bent low in the saddle, studying the ground with the aid of his powerful flashlight, Janie knew. It was the Professor. Who else could it be?

Janie held her breath as the horse passed within inches of her hiding place, its hooves kicking a fine shower of sand in her face. She felt naked and exposed in the radiance cast by the flashlight and she waited without hope to be detected. She closed her eyes.

An eternity passed and nothing happened. Fearfully, Janie raised her head. She was alone. The horse and rider had not halted; some distance away she caught a glimpse of the flashlight beam. Then this too disappeared around a bend in the gorge. She had escaped.

Janie scrambled out of the greasewood thicket but she was shaking so violently at the narrowness of her escape that she couldn't stand up for a minute. What do I do now? she wondered desperately. It occurred to her that she must have been mistaken. She had thought she was headed in the right direction but the Professor had come from the other way. That must mean that, despite the flow of the creek, the meadow lay behind her. It had to be that way; otherwise, why hadn't she reached the meadow by now? That much was reason, but it was fear that convinced her. The Professor had ridden off downstream and she could not bring herself to follow him.

Janie turned and headed back along the creek. She remembered then something she had read, how Indians often confused pursuit by walking in streams to hide their foot-

prints. She stepped into the ankle-deep water and began to ford her way upstream. It was slippery and treacherous footing and the water was cold and she thought with self-pity that she would probably catch pneumonia, just like Mother always warned her about getting her feet wet. The thought of her parents and her home and all the comforts and safety that went with it started her to crying again. Oh, please help me, she prayed, please, please . . .

A new noise, close at hand, brought her to a sudden stop. The bank rose sharply on either side of the creek and was covered with a thick growth of manzanita. It was from the manzanita that the sound came, a rustling sound of someone approaching stealthily.

This time there was nowhere to hide. Janie stood petrified in the middle of the shallow stream and waited for the Professor to find her.

At the junction of Coachella and Linger Creeks, Gib Scott dismounted from his horse and let the animal drink. He played the beam of his flashlight around slowly, examining each bank of the two streams. He didn't see anything to indicate that a child had passed that way.

For a time during the last half hour he had felt, without any real reason for it, that he was on the right track. It was principally a matter of deduction. After failing to find Old Man Ritchie at his camp, Gib had descended the east slope of Breadloaf into Devilgut and ridden back along Coachella Creek. If Janie had wandered into Devilgut it was logical to suppose that she had followed a stream as the easiest and most inviting avenue. Yet he had failed to find any trace of her.

Gib carried no map of the area, nor did he need to. He knew the area well enough to visualize it all in his mind. On it he had drawn a mental circle. The size of the circle was determined by certain known factors: the speed at which a

ten-year-old girl could travel in rough country and the time that she had been missing. It was not a very large circle and it was further compressed by Gib's knowledge that a lost person seldom moves in a straight line even on flat ground, which Devilgut certainly was not.

However, his first bisection of the circle had been unsuccessful—and Gib was acutely aware that every passing hour caused the circle to expand like a blown bubble. Very soon it would be far too large for one man to hope to explore.

There still remained the other principal stream, Linger Creek. If Janie were anywhere near it, she could scarcely fail to see his light or hear his horse. Gib mounted and turned his horse upstream. The animal responded reluctantly to the command sending him in the opposite direction from home.

"I know," Gib sympathized aloud. "I don't like it, either. But think how glad she's going to be to see us."

Gib had no reason to suppose that Janie had already seen him and that the sight—far from producing happiness—had sent her fleeing deeper into the wilderness.

Al Hoffman waited until Restibo had gone out to his car before he used the telephone. He gave the operator the number of the wholesale food supply company in the city that he regularly dealt with. He fidgeted uneasily as the distant telephone buzzed again and again, wondering if for some unlucky reason their night order desk was closed tonight of all nights.

A man's voice finally answered. "Tabakin Distributing."

"This is Al Hoffman at Al's Place up at Hannah Crossing." He had to repeat and amplify this description before the dispatcher understood him. "Your truck usually drops me off a load on Saturday."

"Yes, Mr. Hoffman, what is it?"

"Well, I was wondering if—just this once—I could get a delivery to-morrow, Friday."

"H'm." The dispatcher sounded doubtful. "Well, I don't know. Our schedules are pretty well laid out."

"It's very important."

"It'd mean we'd have to send a special truck and with an order the size of yours——"

"Look," said Hoffman urgently, "I know you'd have to make an extra charge and that's all right. But I've got to have the order to-morrow, first thing in the morning. I've been dealing with you for a long time and this is the first time I've ever asked for any special consideration."

"Of course we want to co-operate," the dispatcher agreed. "It's just that there are quite a few problems involved."

Hoffman took a tight grip on the earpiece. "I already said I'd pay any extra charges. And I want to double my usual order—maybe even triple it. Can't you arrange it somehow?" When the dispatcher still hesitated, he added feverishly. "I got a once in a lifetime deal going here—I can clean up if only I got the stuff to sell. You got to help me!"

The dispatcher sighed. "Well, okay, I'll see what I can do. What do you need?"

Hoffman rattled off the list, mainly an amplification of his regular order. Beer, soft drinks, sandwich materials, cigarettes, candy, tinned goods . . . When he finally paused, the dispatcher commented, "sounds like you're expecting company."

"I sure am," Hoffman agreed jovially. "You'll be reading about it in the papers."

When he hung up, he discovered that Alys had come in from the porch and was listening. "What was that all about?" she asked.

"Business." Hoffman rubbed his sweaty palms on his shirt front. "Alys, you still got your paints out—how about going over those signs?" He gestured at the wall behind the bar. "I want the prices changed on everything. Sand-

wiches up to seventy-five cents, soft drinks a quarter. Jump the hot plate up to two bucks. On second thoughts, maybe it'd be better for you to knock out a whole bunch of new signs, make it look like it's been that way all along."

"But, Dad," Alys protested, "our customers know better. They won't stand for you doubling the prices."

"I figure I'm going to get a whole bunch of new customers. Just as soon as the story breaks, they'll be coming in droves."

"I don't understand. Surely you're not thinking of Janie——"

Hoffman mused happily, "First, there's the search party, maybe a hundred or so. After that, the curiosity seekers driving up from the city. They'll be hungry and thirsty—and they'll have their kids along to pester them for something to eat and drink. There's no place else around they can go. I'll have them right in the palm of my hand."

"But that's awful," Alys said, "profiting on something like this."

"What's awful about it? I got to make a living, that's all—and this might make up for the lousy summer we've had." Hoffman grimaced. "If my luck only holds and they don't find her right away . . ."

"You don't mean that," Alys whispered, horrified.

"Well, of course, I want them to find her," her father temporized. "You know that, sugar. And they will, no doubt about it. I just don't see any harm in trying to get a little good for ourselves out of it. It doesn't hurt anybody, does it?"

Alys stammered a little in exasperation. "It just isn't right! It's low and dirty, can't you see that?"

Al Hoffman looked hurt. "That's no way to talk to your father, Allison."

"I'm sorry." Alys was pale and tense. "I can't help thinking of Janie's father. I think you would, too."

"I am," Hoffman cried. "How am I hurting him—or

the girl, either, for that matter? I didn't lose her, for crying out loud. I'm sorry for everybody. But that doesn't stop me from keeping my eyes open to opportunity. This is business, Alys. Why shouldn't I make a buck if I can?"

"Because you're making it from somebody else's bad luck."

"That's the way life is. At least, Matt Cooper can afford it. Be reasonable, sugar. It's sort of like the war. A lot of people profited from the war who had nothing to do with starting it. They'd have even rather that the war didn't start in the first place. But there it was. Now I'm in the same boat."

"You don't have to be."

"And you don't have to go to Paris next year, either," Hoffman retorted angrily. "That's going to take money, my dear, more than the insurance will amount to, the way prices are these days. I'm only thinking of you."

"Oh, Dad," Alys whispered, shutting her eyes for a moment, "don't put it like that, please! Don't you know I already feel responsible for what's happened?"

Hoffman said impatiently, "I don't know where you're getting all these half-baked ideas of yours. Not from me, that's for sure. This hasn't got anything to do with you and me, that's what I keep telling you. It's just an ill wind that may blow us some good." He flushed under her incredulous stare. "All right, what would you have me do? Cancel the order and go out looking for the brat myself?"

"Yes," she said simply. "That's exactly what I'd rather you did."

"I'd be a real fool, wouldn't I, throwing up everything . . ." He stopped and made his tone placating. "Have a little confidence in your old Dad, sugar. He knows what's right. Now be a good girl and draw me up some new signs and——"

"No," Alys said, backing away from him. "No!" She turned and ran out of the lodge.

Hoffman bounded after her. "You come back here!" But by the time he reached the porch she was already hurrying up the hill, along the trail to Portal Canyon. "All right!" he yelled at her back. "All right, then—I'll do it myself!"

Big Ben was contented. Hunger pains no longer gnawed at his belly. He had gorged himself with meat for the first time in several days and his movements did not possess their previous urgency. At peace with his world, he padded leisurely along through the underbrush, like an elderly gentleman out for an after-dinner stroll.

He paused now and then to investigate a stand of scrub oak but he was no longer searching for food. He was looking for a place to sleep. Like all of the big cats, now that he had stuffed himself he would not need to eat again for another twenty-four hours. Then, impelled by hunger, he would return to the carcass that he had concealed with a light cover of dirt—if some other predator had not discovered it in the meantime. If such were the case, he would find other prey. His first banquet of human flesh, while pleasant, did not change the habit of years.

In the meantime, however, the other inhabitants of the forest had nothing to fear from Big Ben; he did not kill for amusement. Instinct apprised them of his present harmlessness. On his previous foray across Devilgut, the smaller creatures had stayed discreetly out of his path. Now he encountered jack rabbits, skunks and an occasional porcupine. Once he passed within ten yards of a deer and her fawn. Big Ben regarded them all without interest.

Near the bank of Coachella Creek he came upon a tall sycamore and, with lazy enjoyment, stretched up to his full height and manicured his claws on its smooth trunk. Then, like an overgrown housecat, he rolled over on his back in the soft bed of leaves, purring delightedly.

Beg Ben was still in this position when a sudden eddy of the breeze from a new quarter brought an unexpected scent to his nostrils. It was the smell of man again, strong and close by. He was so startled by the nearness of his only enemy that he sprang up, causing the fallen leaves to rustle loudly. Then he stood motionless, a part of the night, while his keen ears pinpointed the location of the intruder.

After a moment, he crept towards the source of the man smell, ears pricked forward. It was the second time to-night that he had stalked the human spoor but this time it was curiosity rather than hunger that impelled him. Crouched almost to his belly, he slipped through a thicket of manzanita and came to the edge of the creek.

He emerged on to a tiny bluff and found himself face to face with his quarry, a small girl who stood ankle-deep in the centre of the stream. From a distance of ten feet—and Big Ben could leap thirty—the two stared at each other, the puma with inquisitive speculation, the child with frozen terror.

An hour earlier, the outcome might have been different. But now Big Ben was interested in the girl only as a possible source of danger. His lambent eyes regarded her for a long instant. When she did not stir, he dismissed her as of no immediate menace. With a graceful bound, he sprang past where she stood and slipped away into the underbrush on the opposite side of the narrow creek.

Behind him he heard the girl begin to splash upstream but Big Ben paid her no further attention, forgetting her completely as he came across the track of a horse and rider. He investigated this trail downstream for a short distance but did not catch up with them and soon lost interest in this sport also.

He took to the trees next and prowled through the roof of the forest until he spied below a natural den of boulders, its entrance nearly blocked by a fallen oak. Big Ben sailed to

the ground and nosed in cautiously. The cavern was dry and uninhabited. He made himself at home, sprawling in a huge furry circle, and began to clean his coat with his tongue. In a few moments, he was asleep.

Gib Scott scowled. He faced the reluctant conclusion that the search for Janie Cooper was going to be more prolonged and difficult than he had supposed. Until now he had proceeded on the assumption that he could do the job himself. But it was well past midnight and the circle on the map had enlarged to the point where it was beyond the power of one man to keep up with it. He would have to get help.

The conclusion was plain but still he hesitated. He disliked the waste of time involved in returning to Hannah Crossing because he knew the importance of time in this sort of affair. He disliked having nothing encouraging to tell Matthew Cooper. And, added to this, he disliked having to admit personal failure, particularly to-night after Alys had practically accused him of being a loafer. That, of course, was not what Alys had said; Gib, like lovers everywhere, was reading more into the quarrel than it merited—and he had been subconsciously counting on a triumphal return with the missing child to vindicate him.

Yet luck had been against him and, though he had done everything possible, this was cold comfort as he swung his horse around and began to retrace his trail down Linger Creek.

"I can't figure it, he mused fretfully; I'd have bet money that she'd be close enough to hear me or see my light. Where can she . . . His heart gave a sudden excited thud as a new sound reached his ears. He identified it immediately. Directly in his path, around a bend of the creek, someone on foot was pushing through the brush. Gib stood up in his stirrups to yell, "Hlex! This way! Over here!" He

spurred his horse up the bank, shining his light ahead of him.

His grin of triumph faded. The figure was not Jané Cooper but another man, also armed with a flashlight. He carried, in addition, a hunting rifle under one arm. He peered, startled, at the man on horseback looming up out of the darkness.

"My God!" he exclaimed, "you scared me half to death. I didn't know there was anybody for miles."

Gib surveyed him in grim disappointment. He recognized the other man as one of the campers from the city who wandered in and out of the Encantos on week-ends and during the summer. Most of them had an amateur fling at prospecting; this year uranium was the magnet that drew them, although none had been found in these parts so far. His name, Gib remembered from the fire permit he had issued, was Calvin Lowry. "Sorry if I spooked you," Gib said. "But I guess we're about even, at that. What brings you into Devilgut at this time of night?"

"I suppose that you, as the ranger, have a right to know," Lowry said with an embarrassed smile. He was a tall, willowy man, not over thirty, with a slight stoop in his shoulders. He had a handsome face, narrow, with candid blue eyes and a friendly full-lipped mouth. Gib's wholly male and private verdict was that he was a little too handsome. What with his fine features and black curly hair, he looked like a lady-killer and the kind that knew it. Hiking boots, old wool trousers and shirt, field jacket—all appeared out of place on Lowry, like a costume. But, thought Gib, it's every man's privilege to get away from his own environment when he feels like it. Lowry explained in his precise voice, "The truth of the matter is that I've been hunting."

"In the middle of the night?"

"I couldn't sleep. When you're an insomniac there's not much difference between day and night. I've been camping over on Black Ridge." Lowry gestured at the sawtooth

range to the south. "I heard Big Ben scream, and I thought I'd have a fling at tracking him down. I suppose it was rather foolish of me."

"It could have been. You won't find Big Ben, but you could break a leg down here easy enough."

"Then I guess I'm fortunate that you happened along." Lowry regarded him curiously. "I didn't know that you fellows worked a night-shift, too."

"We're on call all the time." Gib crooked a leg over his saddle-horn. "Right now, I'm looking for a little girl who's wandered away from her camp. You haven't seen anything of her, have you?"

"You mean there's been a child lost?" Lowry exclaimed. "Good lord, how horrible! No, of course I haven't seen her. This is the first I've heard of it."

"She's been missing since this afternoon some time."

"And you think she may be down here in Devilgut?"

"That was my first guess." Gib shrugged. "But so far I haven't found anything to back it up."

Lowry looked around at the darkness and shuddered slightly. "What a grim spot to be lost in, especially a child! Reminds one of the classical concept of Hades where dead souls wandered around for ever. 'All hope abandon ye——'"

Gib grunted. "It's hardly that bad. I'll admit that Devilgut's pretty much of a mess, especially at night. But we'll find her, all right."

"Oh, I'm sure you will. I only wish that there were something I could do to help."

"Well, maybe there is—especially since you don't seem to mind missing your sleep. I'm heading back to Hannah Crossing right now to get a search party together. I can use every available man."

Lowry hesitated. "I'll do anything I can, of course, but perhaps it would save time if I stayed on here and did a little searching on my own."

Gib considered and shook his head. "I've covered the ground as well as it can be covered before morning. Besides, you'll need a horse. The way this thing is developing, a man on foot won't have much chance of finding her."

"You may be right," Lowry said slowly. "A horse would be better."

"If I can find Ritchie I'll team the two of you up together. I was up at camp earlier but he wasn't there. You haven't run across him in the last day or so, have you?"

"The old prospector? No I haven't."

"Funny he should just up and leave all of a sudden," Gib fretted; it was one more irritation on an irritating night. "Especially without telling anybody."

"Even if I had seen him, I doubt if Ritchie would have confided his business to me," Lowry said with a chuckle. "We've very little in common."

"No," Gib agreed, "you're not much alike, at that. What is your line, anyway, Lowry?"

"Oh, I'm just one of those underpaid slaves in the teaching profession. Physical science department at the college. Geology."

"Rock-hound, huh? Well, looking for lost kids isn't exactly down your alley but I guess you can learn." Gib stretched out his hand. "Time we got going. Climb up behind me, Professor."

At three o'clock in the morning, Janie Cooper had been lost for nine hours. In that length of time, the news of her plight had spread, via radio waves and telephone lines, into homes and offices over a hundred miles distant, affecting or altering the existence of men she would never know—highway patrolmen, sheriff's deputies, Coast Guard helicopter crews . . . even newspapermen. The story had reached the papers in time to make the morning's front pages, and by wire service to span the continent.

Janie Cooper, at the age of ten, was on the verge of becoming famous.

⁶ And while all this was going on, the unknowing cause of it huddled on a sandy bank beside the torpidly flowing waters of Coachella Creek. Exhaustion had finally claimed Janie. She slept and dreamed of home.

FRIDAY

FRIDAY dawned hot and still over the Encanto Mountains. The first person to glimpse the sun's orange edge, as it broke the jagged eastern horizon was Ted Copitas, lieutenant (j.g.), United States Coast Guard. He elbowed the man on the adjoining seat of the helicopter. "You can relax now, Pappy—we're going to get some light on the subject." He had to shout to make himself heard above the clatter of the engine.

His companion grunted. "About time." His name was Peck, a middle-aged taciturn petty officer who doubled aboard the craft as observer and wireless operator. Despite the pilot's reassurance, he kept his eyes fixed on the greyness below. "Wouldn't be surprised if we're lost ourselves."

"Oh, that wouldn't do at all," Copitas said cheerily. He was young and garrulous, a flier who loved his job. "Not in the best traditions of the service, you know."

"Blast me if I know what the Coast Guard's coming to, anyway," grumbled Peck. "Sending us off to the mountains in the middle of the night. Show me where you find that in regulations."

Peck was right. Their present mission was a departure from routine and somewhat outside the authority under which they operated. The helicopter squadron had been established as an adjunct to the Coast Guard's air-sea rescue service. Their duties were defined as protection of life and

property on the high seas, on the coast and in inland flood disasters, none of which exactly fitted this assignment. Furthermore, the Forestry Service operated a small helicopter fleet of its own, a fact which Sheriff Thoreau had forgotten when he called the Coast Guard. But, as it turned out, he had saved valuable time, because the Forestry ships were all some distance north fighting a week-old blaze in another mountain area. Since the Coast Guard possessed the only other trained helicopter rescue unit near the Encantos, the commandant decided to bend the rules for the sake of Janie Cooper. He had a grand-daughter her age. Copitas and Peck, as the stand-by crew, had drawn the duty.

They had left the Coast Guard base in the city while it was still dark, following the main highway east by means of the car headlights below. Their bright yellow helicopter was a medium-sized bubble-nosed craft known at the base as the Beach Buggy because it was equipped with landing skids instead of pontoons. A single three-bladed rotor spun above with a small vertical propeller behind to counteract the rotor's torque effect. It had dual controls and a passenger load capacity of eight under ideal conditions. It could cruise at ninety miles per hour with a range of over two hundred miles and a ceiling of eight thousand feet, all more than sufficient for the job at hand. And, like all its breed, the Beach Buggy was without equal in a search operation, being able to go up and down, backwards and forwards and sideways, or to hover motionless—valuable qualities at any time but particularly so over choppy terrain.

"I figure we should be nearly there," Copitas said. "What do you see?"

"Bunch of trees."

"You're a big help. Anything else?"

"The highway. There's some sort of truck down there, food or something, I guess." Peck craned his neck to the left and then used his binoculars. "Some buildings over there on the port side about a mile. That might be it."

"Let's go see," said Copitas and moved the levers that tilted the rotor and altered the thrust of the propeller. The ungainly craft slid away to the left. At the same time Copitas decreased the rotor speed, causing the helicopter to begin a gradual descent. They passed over the cluster of buildings at about a thousand feet.

"Lots of cars," Peck said. "Horses, too."

"Den dis must be der place," cried Copitas with the accents of a Dutch comic. "Pick us out a nesting place. Pappy."

As they circled Hannah Crossing, the two men in the plexi-glass bubble had a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. Despite the earliness of the hour, the scene below presented a picture of considerable activity. The parking lot between the lodge and the ranger station was cluttered with cars, most of them with attached horse trailers. Men hustled to and fro, or stood in conversing groups. They waved as the helicopter passed above them. To one side, saddled horses waited patiently. In the exact centre of the lot was parked a black official station wagon, a tall radio antenna sprouting from its roof.

"How about that meadow?" asked Peck, pointing at the broad expanse of Chinese Flat. At the mouth of Portal Canyon, the Cooper camp stood deserted, its bonfire extinguished. In the distance, a lone horseman was descending the slopes of Breadloaf. "Looks level enough."

"Too far away," Copitas objected. "If I'd wanted to walk, I'd have joined the army. You can do better than that."

"Only other open space is where all the cars are."

"Then get on the ruddy phone, and tell them to move."

Peck went to the rear of the cabin and adjusted his headset. He switched the transmitter to the police frequency. "Coast Guard 319 to Sheriff's party. Do you read me?"

"Ask them what's for breakfast, too," instructed Copitas with a grin. "I'm hungry as hell."

At the sound of the cars clearing the parking lot, Al Hoffman had rushed outside hopefully, believing that the Tabakin Company truck had arrived. But now he returned, swearing under his breath. "If that food doesn't show up soon it might just as well not come at all," he declared. "For two cents I'd call up the dispatcher and give him a piece of my mind."

But even this course was blocked to him since the instrument was in use. At the far end of the lodge, Matthew Cooper leaned wearily against the jukebox, occasionally speaking in low tones into the mouthpiece but mostly just listening to the person on the other end of the line.

"Already sold out everything I got just to the deputies," Hoffman fumed, pacing along behind the counter. "Nothing left but coffee and beer. Biggest chance of my life and all I can do is watch it go by. And when the real crowd gets here soon . . ." He stopped in front of where his daughter sat and demanded, "What am I going to do?"

Alys was too tired to care, too tired even to be disgusted. Her legs ached from walking and her hand was numb from carrying a lantern. She had spent the hours of darkness in searching rather than sleeping and now she rested against the counter in a sort of daze, occasionally straightening to sip from her coffee cup since—as her father had said—that was all that was left.

"You're a lot of help," Hoffman complained. "Seems to me that you could at least show a little interest in my problems. They're your problems too, you know, and—"

He broke off as Sheriff Thoreau strode in, followed by Restibo. "I can't wait any longer to meet a ranger," Thoreau was saying, as if concluding an argument. "Time's important, mar. We've got to get this show on the road."

In his boots and fringed leather jacket and broad-brimmed hat, he appeared to have stepped directly from a frontier daguerreotype.

"I know," Restibo agreed patiently. "But Gib should be back any minute."

"Where is he anyway? Why isn't he here where he's needed?"

"I already told you. Gib and that school-teacher fellow went out a couple of hours ago for another look around. He promised to be back in time for——"

Thoreau was no longer listening. He went to the wall where the big map hung and stood studying it for a minute. "Don't think we need him, anyway. It all looks pretty simple. Only two ways she could have gone—through Miner's Gap or into Devilgut. We'll just split the posse in two, half one way, half the other. I don't have to wait for some half-ass ranger to tell me that much."

"It looks easier on paper than it really is," Restibo demurred mildly.

"I don't ask for it to be easy, mister," Thoreau stated. "But I do expect a little action—and that's what I'm not getting standing around here." He glanced down the room at Matthew Cooper as if hoping that he had heard this ringing statement but Cooper was still talking on the telephone. "Come on—let's get those men slapping leather."

As they left the lodge, Alys Hoffman rose to follow them. "Hey," her father called, "when do you think you're going?"

She regarded him with weary surprise. "Out looking."

"What about me? I need your help around here." He had to raise his voice as the thunder of the helicopter, settling to earth in the parking lot outside, increased in volume. "You can't go off and leave me alone now."

"Janie's alone," Alys said simply.

"Well, who's more important——" Hoffman found himself shouting as the engine noise outside suddenly died away

and he lowered his voice. "What I mean to say is, there are plenty of people to look for the kid now. You can do more good here than you can traipsing around in the brush."

"Just the same I want to go."

"And I'm telling you I want you to stay here," Hoffman retorted angrily. "After all, I am your father—a fact you seem to be forgetting—and I don't think it's too much to expect to be obeyed once in a while. I let you get away with it last night because you were pretty upset but I got to draw the line some place." Outside a car-horn began to honk and Hoffman made an impatient gesture as if to brush aside the noise. "You understand me, Allison?"

Alys drew a deep breath. "Dad, I don't want to quarrel with you."

"Then do as I say."

"I won't be ordered around like that. I'm not five years old any more. I'm twenty-one, old enough to know what I should do and what I shouldn't."

"Now, you look here!" cried Hoffman. "I don't care if you're a hundred and one, you're going to show a little respect for me!"

Alys eyes flashed but, before she could reply, a man leaned around the doorway. He wore a peaked cap and overalls. "Al Hoffman around?" he asked. "I got a load out here from the Tabakin Company but——"

"I'm Hoffman." He ran around the counter, grinning happily, his anger forgotten. "Boy, am I glad to see you! I thought you weren't coming. What kept you? You can start bringing the stuff in right away."

"I been honking my horn for the last five minutes," the driver told him. "Bunch of cars in the road got me blocked so I can't get any closer. What's going on around here, anyway?"

"Oh, a little excitement. Come on, I'll clear the way for you." Hoffman rushed outside and Alys could hear him shouting at the deputies to move their vehicles.

She sighed. She really didn't want to quarrel with her father, because basically she loved him, faults and all. She even thought she understood him. He wasn't being intentionally petty in this situation of potential tragedy. Like everyone, he was merely trying to justify his existence, to himself as well as others. It just came out that way. And Alys wondered if Gib were right and she and her father were much alike, after all. Did a sense of guilt motivate both of them, Al Hoffman because of his long years of failure and Alys Hoffman because she had behaved irresponsibly first with Janie and then with Gib? Were they both doing penance each in his own way? I must be really tired, she thought; I'm usually not this morbid.

Alys became aware that Matthew Cooper had completed his telephone call and was leaning against the jukebox as if unwilling to abandon its support. She called to him, "The search parties are just leaving, Mr. Cooper. And the helicopter's here. I suppose you heard it."

"Oh," he said, seeming to become aware of her for the first time. "Thank you."

"I'm going out again, too." She forced a smile. "With everybody looking, we'll probably find her right away."

"Miss Hoffman." Alys halted at the door and Cooper came to join her, walking like a weary old man. "I'd like to ask a favour. Could you stay here instead?"

Alys hesitated, wondering if Cooper had overheard the dispute with her father.

"It's my—Janie's mother. I just talked to her on the phone." He frowned painfully at the recollection. "She's pretty upset, naturally. She's driving up from town. Should be here in a couple of hours. She's going to need somebody to meet her and I thought—well, another woman."

"But surely you're the one she'll want to see."

"No," Cooper said slowly, "I don't think she'll want to see me at all. Please—I'd appreciate it if you'd stick around."

Alys nodded reluctantly. "I just want to help and if that's what you really want . . ." Two men had requested the same favour and it seemed rather odd to her that, of the two, it was the stranger she obeyed and her father whom she refused. What's happening to me? she wondered.

"Thanks," Cooper murmured. "I guess I'd better go out and talk to the pilot."

He had to stand aside to allow Al Hoffman to enter, followed by the driver. Each man carried a large cardboard carton. "Just put it on the counter," Hoffman directed. "I'll put the stuff away later. Or maybe my daughter'll do it." He looked narrowly at Alys as she hung her cardigan behind the bar. "Changed your mind about staying, huh?"

"I guess I'm needed here."

"Good girl," Hoffman complimented her. "I knew you'd see it my way."

Calvin Lowry looked at his wrist-watch and then pursed his lips, considering. It was nearly six o'clock, which meant that he was late already. Upon parting from the ranger two hours before, he had agreed to rendezvous with him at the Cooper camp site no later than six so that they might then co-ordinate their search patterns with those of the Sheriff's deputies. It was now past time to turn back.

Yet he was reluctant to do so, knowing himself to be on the brink of success. The past two hours' prowl through Devil-gut had finally yielded results. He was on the right track. Only a moment before he had discovered a small footprint on the muddy bank of Coachella Creek. Janie Cooper had passed this way. How recently Lowry couldn't be sure but he felt confident that another hour or two, now that it was daylight, would be sufficient for him to close in upon her. She had a head start, it was true—but he was on horseback while she was on foot. And, he told himself, his determination was greater. His life depended upon it.

Another hour or two, that was all he needed . . . However Lowry realized that this amount of time was precisely what he did not have. Should he fail to return on schedule, his absence would cause wonder and speculation. The obvious conclusion would be the true one, that he had found Janie's trail and was following it. Others would come looking—and that would be fatal to his plans. Much as it went against the grain, he had to turn his back on his quarry at this moment in order to guarantee success for the future.

"I can wait," he murmured aloud, making his decision. He felt proud of his capacity for logic at a moment when his emotions were urging him to press forward. Most men, so close to success in such a vital matter, wouldn't be capable of restraint. But that was what made him superior.

He lingered a minute longer, long enough to dismount and obliterate the muddy footprint with a sage-brush branch. Then he swung up to the saddle once more and turned the borrowed horse back in the direction of the meadow. I'll be back, he vowed silently, taking careful note of the surrounding landmarks. She doesn't have a chance against me.

Lowry had no doubt as to his superiority. He had never had any doubts on this score, not only in the present instance, but all his life. From his earliest recollections, he had known instinctively that he stood head and shoulders above the crowd, even though the record of his life might seem to indicate otherwise. But failure—or at least a lack of conspicuous success—had not shaken his confidence in himself as a superior being. His mirror told him he was handsome. Tests confirmed that he was brilliant. He could trace his lineage back to pre-Revolutionary stock, even though the family wealth had long since disappeared. In his youth, great things had been expected of him—and no one had expected them more than Calvin Lowry himself.

Yet somehow the great things had not materialized. Other

men—less handsome, less talented—had forged ahead, leaving him to struggle in a station he felt was far below what he deserved. In college, he had majored in geology. He might have done equally as well in English or medicine, since all studies came easy, but he had chosen geology because he knew there was a shortage of such specialists in industry, and he would be able to go far. But the corporation aptitude-tests had resulted in his being passed by as not homogeneous and the well-paid positions had gone to others. In desperation, once he had acquired his master's degree, he had turned to teaching, impelled chiefly by the picture of himself as the revered professor surrounded by admiring students. This hadn't turned out exactly as he expected, either. After five years, he was still nothing more than an assistant in the department, and not a particularly popular one at that. He suspected the deans in the front office had something against him. At least, he was certain somebody was to blame for the astonishing failure of his text-book. He had counted on the book—a slight revision of his master's thesis—to establish his reputation, but it had not been accredited by any major university.

Of course, if he had his doctorate—but that was Edna's fault. The dissertation was long overdue and he had got two extensions but the work was still no more than jotted notes, unorganized. But when did he have the time and energy to work on it, with the department head piling more and more duties on him, and Edna constantly nagging at home? She had no business marrying him before his degrees were complete. Once she had been the college belle that he—together with many others—had yearned for, but how hard it was to recall the golden girl who strutted down the field whirling her baton, her white-booted bare legs flashing in the sunlight, her saucy little rump . . . and one more desire became a stagnant hoax. Edna had lost most of her looks in matronly fat and she cried a great deal of the time and complained of ills that Lowry believed imaginary. At times it

was all he could do to keep from striking her across the face, both her and the children. For his two small sons favoured their mother in looks and disposition and served only as economic burdens and household pests. But his home life had never reached the point of violence because he was always able to conceal himself behind a cold smile or a cutting remark. Many evenings he would simply retire to the bedroom and sit on the bed in solitude while he analysed himself and his problems. He was proud of his ability to see himself clearly, his few faults, his many talents. Never did anyone suspect the furious turmoil that ached in his belly, because he kept himself under such perfect control. His analytical conclusions were always the same frustrating ones. That he was not an eminent man, a richer man, was because of circumstances outside himself, unfortunate circumstances that had nagged him all his life. The story he had given Gib Scott of searching for Big Ben was a lie, of course, but it contained the seeds of truth. Lowry would have welcomed a chance to bag the great cat merely for the bounty. He considered himself ludicrously underpaid.

The cat that walks alone . . . Lowry wallowed through life in a morass of loneliness, yet who was worth his attention? He could not escape circumstances but he could escape people and it was for this reason that he spent as much of his leisure time as possible in the Encantos. Ostensibly, he was gathering material for his Ph.D., or so he told his acquaintances, but in actuality he only wanted to be alone with himself. Alone in the wilderness, aloof from the scheming others, his dreams of power and glory were not squeezed juiceless in the trap of reality.

Among his camping equipment was a solid expression of his dreaming, a portable scintillation counter. It was costing him over six hundred dollars in time payments, far more than he could afford, but in the back of his mind was the gnawing hope that, in his solitary wanderings through the mountains, he might somehow stumble across a fabulous

uranium lode, and thus be rich at a single stroke. Lowry felt that money would solve all his problems. And while the Encantos had yet to yield any trace of uranium, it wasn't impossible . . .

He emerged from Devilgut on to the broad expanse of Chinese Flat. Directly in his path was the large boulder upon which Janie Cooper had stood watching while . . . Involuntarily, Lowry looked upwards at the sawtooth outline of Black Ridge. It loomed silent and peaceful in the early morning light. Yet less than twenty-four hours before a man had died there, died at Lowry's hands. It hardly seemed possible.

Even in retrospect he felt no pity or regret. Ritchie had laughed at him, had ridiculed his aspirations and made them the butt of any number of sneering remarks. He had positively delighted in following Lowry around simply to mock him. Lowry could still hear his taunting voice. "How many tons of uranium you found to-day, Professor? . . . How about loaning me a million or two, Professor? . . ." The stinking old illiterate, Lowry thought grimly, talking to me as if I were some half-wit child. He had warned Ritchie, but the old man had persisted until finally he had come to symbolize everyone whom Lowry hated. So he had killed him. His conscience did not plague him; the event hardly seemed important to-day.

And now he must kill the little girl also. This was a somewhat different matter since he did not hate Janie except in-so-far as she represented a threat to his safety. That he would succeed in finding her and silencing her, Lowry was confident, because he would be the only one looking in the right place. But it seemed rather regrettable and he wondered how he would feel when the actual moment arrived. He pictured her cowering in front of him, snivelling and crying as he squeezed the trigger. This concept reminded him of Edna and somehow made the prospect much easier.

As he neared the mouth of Portal Canyon, he saw that

Gib Scott was there before him and was waiting near the deserted Cooper camp site. Lowry spurred his horse forward, putting on an anxious expression.

"Where you been?" Gib greeted him. "I was beginning to think we'd have to look for you, too."

"I went a considerable distance into Devilgut, farther than I intended. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Find anything?" Gib watched Lowry shake his head and he grimaced. "Same here. I combed Breadloaf pretty good, went clear on up to the fire tower at White Peak. Nothing. Didn't run across Old Man Ritchie, either. Beats me what could have happened to him."

"Seems to me we've got enough to worry about with the little girl," Lowry said easily. "Ritchie's old enough to take care of himself."

"Well, I could certainly use his help." Gib turned his horse down the trail towards Hannah Crossing and Lowry followed suit. "You know, when you were gone so long I had a feeling you might have found something."

"It's my belief that she went down Miner's Gap and not into Devilgut at all."

"Maybe so. Whatever way she went, we'll find her before long. We've got to."

"Very true," Lowry agreed, and hid his smile. "We've got to."

Despite Sheriff Thoreau's impatience, the search parties had still not got under way at six-thirty. The arrival of the helicopter and the subsequent dispersion of the cars had created some confusion, and some other stumbling blocks had arisen, besides. These came down principally to a lack of organization.

Thoreau's plan, as he had outlined it to his chief deputy, was to divide the posse into two groups, each approximately twenty-five men strong. The Red section was to explore

Devilgut while the Blue section was to press through Miner's Gap into the forest country beyond. These groups would then separate into two-man search teams, each team equipped with a portable radio transmitter and receiver known as a handie-talkie. Since the range of the handie-talkies was limited—not over two miles under the best of conditions—both Red and Blue sections were also furnished with one larger radio unit, a horse-carried back-pack whose effective radius was around twenty-five miles. With the handie-talkies, the search teams would keep in touch with each other; with the back-packs they would maintain communication with the sheriff's station wagon and the Coast Guard helicopter.

In this manner, it would be possible to spread a sizeable—yet manageable—net over the area to be searched. It was an efficient plan, at least in outline, but its implementation presented some problems that Thoreau hadn't fully reckoned with.

Restibo stood among the deputies who milled curiously around the helicopter. He wished devoutly that Gib Scott would show up soon. Thoreau was obviously out of his element at mounting a search through the wilderness and, while Restibo had anticipated several potential dangers, he couldn't be sure that he had anticipated them all. And it was a delicate job, trying to point out his superior's mistakes without antagonizing him unduly in the process. Restibo had a proper respect for those above him, and it was his nature to try to get along with everybody, but he was not blind to Thoreau's shortcomings. And Thoreau was touchy; he could be led only so far before he bucked.

Already Restibo had drawn Thoreau's annoyance twice. The first time concerned the matter of rations, where Restibo had pointed out that a day's supply of food and water was not sufficient. Should the hunt stretch on, the search teams would be forced to return to their base, thus cutting down on their effective range. "

Thoreau, foreseeing an early end to the search, had been hostile to the idea but had finally given in, and Al Hoffman and his daughter were now passing out supplies on the lodge porch.

The second matter concerned maps. No one had thought to bring any, and the only detailed map of the area was the big one that hung in the lodge. Yet obviously each team would need a map to avoid duplication of effort.

Thoreau had exploded at this. "Seems to me all you can think of is reasons why we shouldn't get this show on the road," he told Restibo. "We're bogging down in details. I want to get these men moving pronto."

"Yes, sir. But without maps——"

"Then get the maps," Thoreau said, waving his hands impatiently. "Just don't bother me with any more details. I've got enough to do as it is." And he stamped away to confer with the pilot of the helicopter.

"I'll get them," Restibo promised the deputies who stood by, listening. "I don't know where, but I'll get them. We can always drop them to you later from the chopper. Right now you'd better get ready to ride."

"We are ready," one of the deputies said. "Just waiting for orders."

"Then hit the trail," Restibo said briefly. The deputies began to swing into their saddles, turning the parking lot into a milling mass of jostling horseflesh, shying and rearing.

Thoreau came running back, shouting, "Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" He hurried up the lodge steps and faced them from the porch. "Who told you men to leave, anyway? I got a few words to say to you before you go." He glared around while they quieted, reining in before the porch. "Men, give me your attention. You all know the seriousness of this situation. Somewhere out there is a little girl. She's lost and she's scared and she's counting on us, on you and me, to find her. It's a big job and an important one."

He glanced quickly along the porch to where Matthew Cooper stood, then back at his men. "I've given you your instructions. You know what to do and how to do it. There's just one more thing I've got to say. It's this"—he paused like a football coach giving a half-time pep talk—"find her! Now get going!"

The posse looked like an army as it swung away from the lodge in a compact group. All the deputies wore the khaki uniform trousers and shirt of the department, complete with star badge and sunburst shoulder patch and dun-coloured wide-brimmed hats. Some who knew the mountains best had brought along a leather working-chaps, to protect their legs from the brush. Restibo found himself watching beside Alys Hoffman. She murmured, "Was that really necessary?"

The posse filed on to the trail through Portal Canyon. Restibo said, "I wish Gib would get back. We need him."

"He's only one man."

"Sometimes that's enough," Restibo told her. "If it's the right man." "He crossed to where the sheriff was talking to Matthew Cooper. "Sheriff, I figure we may be able to get the maps from the Forestry Service, and we could drop them to the teams by the helicopter."

"Of course," agreed Thoreau, as if it were his own idea. "No problem at all. I'm going to be in the helicopter myself." He turned to Cooper. "Best way to keep on top of things, be able to have everything at my fingertips."

Cooper didn't seem to be impressed by Thoreau's generalship. He asked quietly, "Do you think you can find her?"

"Not a doubt in the world," Thoreau assured him heartily. "Nobody's better at this sort of thing than my posse. Should be, trained them myself. We'll have her back by lunch, wait and see." He chuckled. "I want to get this thing over fast, you know. There's the rodeo Sunday and we don't dare tire out the horses."

His attempt at humour fell flat. Cooper merely stared at

him bleakly and Thoreau coughed. "Just kidding, of course."

Restibo rescued him. "Too bad that the bloodhounds didn't get here before everybody started tramping over the hills. They'll probably mess up the scent too much for the dogs to do much good."

Thoreau's expression was blank. "Bloodhounds?"

"Yeah. On the phone last night, you said you were going to call the Weigand kennels and get the trackers up here first thing." Restibo shook his head. "They should have been here by now."

"Yeah," Thoreau mumbled. "They should have. Excuse me."

He turned abruptly and went into the lodge. The two Coast Guardsmen sat at the counter, drinking coffee, and Al Hoffman's head was visible in the kitchen beyond. Thoreau went to the phone. When the operator replied, he looked cautiously around to see that he was not overheard and said in a low voice, "Operator, I want the Weigand kennels in town and make it fast."

The sheriff's posse remained in a single group until they reached the meadow. Then, true to plan, they divided. The Blue half turned towards the rocky defile known as Miner's Gap. The Red group rode off towards the tangle of Devilgut, there to divide again into the individual search teams. It was now a little past seven o'clock in the morning.

At the moment that these twenty-four men, comprising twelve teams, entered Devilgut from the west, the object of their search was just leaving it to the east, a straight line distance of slightly over three miles.

Janie was thoroughly confused. Like most children, she had no sure sense of direction and she clung hopefully to various odd scraps of information that she recalled from her reading. One of these concerned the use of the sun to find

one's bearings, since it always rose from one direction and set in the other. The flaw in this was that Janie couldn't remember which was which in relation to her father's camp site. After much indecision, she had finally decided to walk directly towards the rising sun in the hope that it was the right thing to do. But, of course, it was not and every step put her just that much farther from her goal.

However, she seemed to be emerging from the maze of Devilgut and this encouraged her. The choppy badlands gave way to a gradual rise and she finally topped the summit named Silent Ridge and gazed down the wooded expanse of Faro Valley.

Janie hesitated a long time. She didn't recognize the country that lay beneath her but it bore a general resemblance to the forest land near her camp. And with the terror of the Professor and the puma fresh in her memory, she could not face the prospect of turning back into Devilgut. This must be the right way. It had to be. She struck off determinedly down the slope, walking faster now, since it seemed that she was getting close to home.

Although both pursued and pursuers were travelling in the same general direction, the posse's speed was greater. At the present rate, they would overhaul Janie before sundown. That is, if nothing interfered.

Except for the cluster of parked cars and horse trailers, Hannah Crossing was somnolent and still as Gib and Lowry rode in. Restibø came running out from the lodge as they dismounted. "Find anything?" he asked.

Both Gib and Lowry shook their heads. Gib climbed the steps slowly, his legs stiff from the long hours in the saddle. "Where's everybody?"

"The posse just left a few minutes ago. You should have run into them."

"We cut over Black Ridge. The sheriff inside?"

Restibo smiled ruefully. "He decided to ride the helicopter instead."

Gib raised his eyebrow. "That's no place for him to be. He should be here where he can stay on top of things when they break, not out roaming around the wild blue yonder."

Restibo didn't want to appear disloyal. "Well, there's a chance the plane will spot her, especially if she doesn't throw away her red jacket."

"You know how slim that chance is. She'd have to be crossing open country to be seen from the air, and there isn't much of that. And if she's under the trees and hears the plane, it won't do her any good to yell at it, the noise it makes. It'd be gone again before she could shin up a tree. Chance in a million." Gib turned to Lowry. "Come on, let's get something to eat before we start out again."

Alys was behind the counter when the two men entered and her eyes lit up hopefully at the sight of Gib, then faded as she noticed his frown. "Where have you been all this time?"

"Where do you suppose?" Gib retorted. He was still irritated at the discovery that the sheriff had ducked his proper duties and that the search, for all practical purposes, lacked a co-ordinating head. "How about fixing the Professor and me some breakfast?"

Alys had her own irritations, not the least of these being the sound of her father humming happily to himself in the kitchen, and Gib's snappishness rubbed her the wrong way. "Oh, pardon me," she said sarcastically. "I forgot that you believe that woman's place is in the home. What will you have, O master?"

"Well, it was my impression that you're running a restaurant here."

"My father runs a restaurant—but that doesn't make me a waitress."

Lowry chuckled. Gib flushed. After a moment, he said

stiffly, "I'm very sorry. If it isn't too much to ask, maybe your Dad will consider selling us a can of beans or something. We'll open it ourselves."

Alys eyed him in exasperation and then sighed. "Oh, sit down. I'll fix something for you, I guess." She marched into the kitchen and they could hear her rattling pots and pans.

"I can't win," Gib^{it} muttered, staring after her. "What'd I say, anyhow?"

"You never win with women," Lowry said dryly. "At least, she doesn't appear to be the weeping type. You're lucky in that regard."

"That's about the only way I'm lucky," Gib^{it} walked down the room to the cluster of tables. Matthew Cooper was seated at one of them, his forehead pillowed on his folded hands. He jerked upright, startled, as Gib sat down.

"Oh," he said, blinking. "What—— I guess I must have dropped off. I didn't hear you come in. Did you . . . ?"

"Not yet," Gib said gently. "But it's still early. Lowry and I will be going out again^{it} as soon as we eat."

Cooper looked from one man to the other and then stared down at his hands. He murmured, "All my life, I've made my own way, done it all myself. Never asked help from anybody. Never had it. And now, when it counts the most, I have to depend on strangers. It doesn't seem right."

"In a case like this, nobody's a stranger, Mr. Cooper. We're all in it together, the sheriff and his men and the Coast Guard and me—and even the Professor here."

"That's right," Lowry agreed in a soothing voice. "We're all making a united effort. I know that I——"

"I'm grateful," Cooper assured them heavily. "But I guess you can't understand what it's like, not really. She's not your daughter." I feel so damn helpless!

They all looked around as the screen door banged. Fell Laughlin came in. He spotted them and hurried over. "Anything new, Gib?"

Gib shook his head, reluctant to repeat the lack of progress aloud while Cooper sat there with quiet desperation etched on his features. It seemed like rubbing it in, the constant hopeful question and negative answer, though it was only natural, of course, since it was the subject uppermost in everyone's mind.

Laughlin sat down, removed his hat and mopped his forehead. "It's going to be another hot one. I just got back with what horses I could round up from my place. We're going to need plenty of fresh mounts in this weather."

"The posse's already gone."

"Where? Devilgut?"

"Half there, the rest through Miner's Gap."

Laughlin shook his head. "Why Miner's Gap? She has to be in Devilgut. You couldn't lose a three-year-old in Miner's Gap. It's simple straight-line country, even when you get into the trees beyond."

"That's how I look at it too," Gib agreed. "However, the Professor spent a couple of hours in Devilgut this morning and didn't draw blood."

"You could spend a couple of weeks in there without really covering it." Laughlin glanced at Cooper and added hastily, "What I mean is, one man by himself. Besides, the Professor isn't any expert at this sort of thing; no offence intended."

Lowry didn't say anything but merely looked sceptical.

"No," Laughlin continued, "Devilgut it's got to be. My notion would be that you and I should really give it the fine toothcomb treatment, Gib, the two of us."

"The three of us," Lowry put in quickly. "I'm in this all the way."

Cooper said quietly, "I'm going, too." When no one responded, he glanced around challengingly. "I mean it. Don't try to stop me."

Gib saw Laughlin watching him questioningly and knew

it was up to him, 'although it was a duty he disliked. "I'm afraid you can't, Mr. Cooper."

"Can't? What do you mean, I can't?"

"I know it's tough to stay here, a lot tougher than going out. But look at it this way. Here is the focal point of the search, the headquarters. Here is where you're needed, just as much as the sheriff. You have to be here for consultation and identification, all kinds of things that might come up."

"And you don't know the country," Laughlin pointed out. "You might end up getting lost yourself."

"That's right. This job calls for skilled labour. We don't dare send out anybody but professionals. If we make you part of a search team it might do no more than slow down that team. And you've got your emotions too tied up in this thing to risk going out alone."

"I'm going," Cooper stated inflexibly.

Gib faced him squarely across the table. "I hate to put it on this basis, but I'm going to. You're staying put. That's an order from the Forestry Service, Mr. Cooper."

Alys came carrying a tray of food from the kitchen in time to hear the last of this. Cooper broke off the duel of eyes to appeal to her. "Miss Hoffman, you tell him. You understand how it is, why I've got to be out there looking for her instead of sitting here. Please help me."

Troubled, Alys looked from his pleading face to Gib's set expression. "Gib, don't you think that perhaps——"

"One man more in the search party won't matter. One man here might."

"But he's her father."

"I know that," Gib snapped. "But I also know what's best and I don't set any point in arguing about it."

"Well, pardon me," Alys said thinly. With angry movements, she placed a plate of ham and eggs before Gib and another in front of Lowry. Cooper, beaten, covered his

eyes with his hand and Laughlin cleared his throat uncomfortably.

They were all grateful for the interruption of Restibo, who came in from the porch. He looked troubled. "I was just talking to the sheriff on the radio."

"You tell him I was here?" Gib inquired, taking large bites of his breakfast. Restibo nodded. "He coming back to take over?"

"Matter of fact, no." Restibo was embarrassed. "He said that things were fine just as they were. He seemed to be enjoying the ride."

"Great," said Gib between his teeth. "How about all the things that need tending to here? How about the bloodhounds—they'll be here soon. How about the maps for the search teams? Who's going to handle all that stuff?"

"The answer's obvious," Restibo told him quietly. "You are."

"I'm on my way up to Devilgut, just as soon as I finish eating."

"Let me see you a minute," Restibo suggested and walked down the lodge towards the jukebox. Unwillingly, Gib followed him, still chewing on a piece of ham. "Gib, we got a bad situation. Thoreau's all right in his way, I guess, but he's in over his head here. He was going to send the posse out without even enough food for one day if I hadn't stopped him. Now's he's off on a joy-ride. Lord knows what he'll be up to next. There's no other way around it—you've got to take over here."

"Why? You're chief deputy. You're the official number two man."

"Exactly." A faint smile appeared on Restibo's frog-like face. "Being number two man's my profession. It's what I do best, running things. Not deciding them, running them. You take over."

"I know this country better than anybody else," Gib pro-

tested. "The place for me is out there with the search teams."

"Your place is wherever you're needed the most. And that's right here."

Gib quirked his mouth at the irony, his own arguments of a moment before recoiling on him. "You know that won't work, Restibo. Whatever Thoreau's shortcomings, he's legally the top man. He won't take kindly to me stepping into his shoes."

"You'll have to do it diplomatically, all right, so that he doesn't tumble to what's going on. It won't be easy. But you've got to do it."

"Thoreau swings a mean axe around these parts. It could mean my job."

"It could also mean the little girl's life. Which is more important to you?"

Gib grimaced. "That's a hell of a question."

"It's up to you to answer it."

Gib looked down the room at the others, who were all watching him. He strode back to the table, his expression stony. "Fell, you and the Professor better ride on out without me. I'm going to have to stay here—for a while, anyway."

"As soon as he finishes his meal," Laughlin agreed.

"I am finished," Lowry said, pushing back his chair. "Let's go."

Gib followed them out to the porch. "Since I won't be going along, there's a couple of things you ought to keep in mind. I'm aiming this at you, Professor, since Fell knows this sort of work pretty well already. What you got to remember is that you're trying to trail a kid, a ten-year-old. They're unpredictable; don't necessarily follow grown-up logic. In other words, don't expect Janie to react the way you yourself might in a given situation. She's wearing moccasins which won't leave much of a track, if any, but there are other signs you can look for. Broken branches and brush,

for instance. Since it's a hot day, she might even try getting rid of some of her clothes. The main thing is—be thorough. She may be sleeping or holed up somewhere and you could ride right by and never know she was there."

Lowry nodded thoughtfully. "I won't leave any stones unturned, believe me."

"I'm sorry we don't have any extra handie-talkies to give you. You're going to be more or less on your own, so take it easy and don't push your horses. I don't want to have to start worrying about you, too."

"You won't have to," Laughlin assured him. "We can take care of ourselves."

"You're going to have to. There won't be anybody else to depend on."

"That's all right with me," Lowry said.

"Then good luck." Gib watched them start towards the fresh horses and then he turned and went back into the lodge, not particularly wishing to see them ride off on a mission he felt was his own.

Alys was standing uncertainly by the table, making some effort at clearing away the dishes. She regarded him with an expression that seemed more sympathetic than previously. Her voice was kinder, too, as if she understood his disappointment. "Gib, I know how you must feel——"

"It's all right," he said curtly, not wanting to talk about it. "It's my job, that's all."

"Of course," she murmured, her blue eyes turning cold once more. "I forgot that you always do your job."

Restibo broke in apologetically, "Gib, I know you're bushed but we've got a problem or two to settle. Those maps—if we don't get them to the search teams before long they'll be going around in circles. I wondered if the Forestry Service might——"

"I've got maybe half a dozen on hand. I'd have to get the rest from the district office in Los Angeles—if they have them. Like you say, it's a question of time." He paced

restlessly to the big map on the lodge wall and stood scowling at it. "Alys, come over here a minute." She hesitated at the peremptory summons and he added wearily, "Please."

She rejoined him, expression wary. "What is it?"

"You heard the problem. We need about twenty maps in a hurry. Any suggestions?" He watched her puzzled frown a moment and then murmured, "You're an artist, aren't you?"

She understood. "I paint, yes. But I'm not a draftsman."

"Well, it was just a thought."

"If you really want me to, I could try," Alys said impatiently. "Why don't you just tell me to do it, like you told Mr. Cooper what to do? Aren't you in charge here?"

"A while ago, you bit my head off for ordering you around."

"That was different. That was—well, between you and me. This concerns Janie. Don't you understand?"

"No," Gib admitted and managed a bleak smile. "But I guess that's not all I don't understand. Alys, maybe we——"

"No," Alys interrupted, "let's keep it strictly business, shall we? You do your job and I'll do mine."

"Okay." Gib returned and walked out on to the lodge porch. The air felt cool against his hot face.

"Mr. Scott!" A standby deputy was trotting towards him. "Restibo wants you down at the radio wagon."

Gib rode along with the deputy. "They spotted the girl? Where?"

"No. Blue section leader just radioed in. They came across her telescope in Miner's Gap. No rust on it, must be hers. They're sending a man with it and Blue section's proceeding north as before. Restibo's trying to contact the sheriff."

"Miner's Gap," muttered Gib and shook his head incredulously.

Matthew Cooper kicked the tyre of the sheriff's station wagon in exasperation. "Why are we waiting here? Now that we know where Janie went——"

"We're not sure yet," Gib told him. He leaned against the fender and tried to listen to Restibo's conversation inside with the sheriff via radio.

"Of course, we're sure!" Cooper exploded. The discovery of the toy, the first tangible bit of evidence yet uncovered, had excited him tremendously, rekindling his hope. "That has to be Janie's telescope. Who else's could it be?"

"Hoffman's got a whole rack of those telescopes in the lodge. Your daughter's not the only child who may have dropped one in these mountains. I'll admit it looks pretty good for us. If it is Janie's telescope, we're going to have to reorganize the whole search, pull the posse out of Devilgut altogether. But we can't do that till you give us a positive identification, Mr. Cooper. Otherwise, we might be making an awful mistake."

Cooper bit his lip and paced up and down. "What's taking that deputy so long to get here?" he muttered.

"Keep watching the trail," Gib advised, nodding in the direction of Portal Canyon. "He'll be showing up soon." He straightened as Restibo emerged from the station wagon. "Well?"

"The helicopter's on the way back."

"Good. Any instructions?"

"As soon as we get a positive identification, I'm to call back the search teams from Devilgut. The sheriff wants to send them up across Breadloaf to rendezvous with the rest of the posse in Miner's Gap."

"That won't do," Gib objected. "It looks easy on the map but they'll waste a couple of hours going that way. The

fastest route is to make a circle back through the meadow. It's longer but faster. Get on the radio again and——"

"There he is!" Cooper exclaimed, pointing up the trail to where a horseman had just appeared at the mouth of Portal Canyon. "Hey!" He began to run towards the newcomer.

"Come on," Gib told Restibo. They ran after Janie's father. The deputy sighting them, put his horse into a gallop, narrowing the gap rapidly. They all came together at the spot where the road ended and the trail began. They wasted no time in greetings. As the deputy reined in his horse and slid to the ground, Cooper panted, "Where is it?" The deputy produced the shiny toy from his pocket and Cooper seized it eagerly.

For a long moment, he was silent as the others watched his face. Then he said softly, "It's hers." His shoulders quivered as if the sight of his daughter's cherished belonging was more than he could bear. /

"You're sure?" Gib asked. "

"She broke the strap," Cooper murmured, his fingers running gently over the knot in the leather thong. "I tied it for her. Just yesterday."

Gib swung around to Restibo. "That does it. I was wrong. She did go down Miner's Gap. Get on the radio and pull your Red section out of Devilgut as fast as possible, tell them to rendezvous back in the meadow." He frowned, considering. "Too bad that Laughlin and the Professor are out of touch but that can't be helped. Oh, and when you're through with that tell Alys to speed up the maps but to concentrate just on the Miner's Gap—Murray Forest section."

"What are you going to be doing?" Restibo asked, startled.

"I'm going to take a quick ride up to the meadow and make sure that the posse gets started in the right direction. It'll give me a chance to check on Old Man Ritchie again,

too." He saw Restibo's dubious expression. "Don't worry, I'll be back inside an hour."

"How about me?" Matthew Cooper asked hopefully. "Can't I go along with you this time?"

Gib hesitated. He knew he would make better time alone yet he could not bring himself to spurn the expression on Cooper's face. He said, "Get yourself a horse."

The news of Janie Cooper's disappearance had been front page copy for the morning newspapers but it was not until past eight o'clock when the first contingent of newsmen reached Hannah Crossing. This consisted of two reporters and two photographers. Between them, they represented all three of the city dailies (since two papers were owned by one firm and the staff often doubled for both), and also the two principal wire services. And, although the two reporters were in direct competition with each other, they had come up to the mountains in one car, being good friends, press rivalry notwithstanding. The reason for their delay in arriving upon the scene was due to a tyre-burst midway in their journey.

"I'm glad I let you bum a ride," Sid Beal told his fellow reporter. Beal, who represented the *Sentinel* and *Evening News*, was short and swarthy, conservative in dress and outlook, like his newspapers. "If I hadn't, you'd have got here ahead of me and my boss wouldn't have liked that at all."

"I don't need any handicap to beat you out," George Mahdesian replied, grinning. "Remember last week?"

"You were just plain lucky."

"Care to make a little bet on who gets the first break?" Mahdesian needled. He was a gambler by nature, an intense younger man, lean and tall, with a reckless face and bold dark eyes. The *Press-Examiner*, sensational and flamboyant, suited his personality exactly, and Mahdesian was one of their top men.

Beal ignored the bait. "That must be the place ahead of us. What the devil is making all the racket?"

One of the photographers in the back seat, craning his neck, said, "Helicopter. Looks like it's getting ready to land."

He was right. As the reporter's car reached the scatter of buildings that composed Hannah Crossing, the yellow helicopter was just settling on the hard-packed earth of the lodge parking lot. "Pull up beside it," Mahdesian suggested. "Maybe they got the kid with them."

Beal did as he directed, although they discovered immediately that the craft did not contain the missing girl. However they were in time to greet Sheriff Thorpeau as he descended stiffly.

"Not now," was his brusque reply to their questions. "I don't have time to talk to you now. See me later."

"When do you think you'll find her?" Mahdesian asked, unabashed. But the sheriff merely shook his head, scowling, and hurried away in the direction of his station wagon where two of his deputies waited for him. Beal turned his questions towards the helicopter's crew but a moment of listening convinced Mahdesian that he would learn nothing vital from that quarter. He left Beal talking to the Coastguardsmen and slipped away towards the lodge.

He was disappointed to find the building virtually deserted. A man worked, almost hidden from view, in the kitchen and at one of the tables a young blonde in jeans and plaid shirt was bent determinedly over a clutter of papers. She wasn't conscious of his presence and Mahdesian inspected her for a sensual moment. Well, well, he thought; maybe there's more than news in this assignment. He wondered how that snug denim would respond to an affectionate pat. As he moved closer, he cast a quick glance at her fingers. They were innocent of rings. "Excuse me," he said. "I wonder if you could help me."

She whirled around, startled. Her young mouth pleased

him, too—wide and full, a promising sign. "Oh, I didn't hear you come in. Would you mind calling my father? He's in the kitchen but he can help you. I'm, very busy."

"So it appears," Mahdesian said, smiling affably. "But I don't really want to buy anything. I'm a reporter. My name's George Mahdesian and I represent the *Press-Examiner*."

"Oh," she said again. "Well, you probably want to see the sheriff."

"I've seen the sheriff already—and you're much prettier." Mahdesian sensed at once that this approach was too sudden for her, so he shifted into a more business-like tone. "I would like to ask you a couple of questions, Miss . . .?"

"Hoffman," she said unwillingly. "Alys Hoffman."

"I gather that they haven't found the Cooper child yet. Do you know if they have any leads, any progress at all?"

"I'd really rather you ask somebody else."

He already had her catalogued as a girl careful of appearances, very formal up to a certain point. He'd have to get acquainted, let her get used to what a nice guy he was, then catch her in an intimate situation and let nature take its lovely course. This formal mind usually unbent with breath-taking rapidity after the proper build-up—and if they were sure no one would know. Mahdesian made his smile a little less roguish, turning on what he considered exactly the right amount of charm. "I'm perfectly willing to ask somebody else, Miss Hoffman, and I'm sorry to interrupt your work. But I haven't been able to find anybody who knows anything. Where is everybody? Say, the father, Matt Cooper?"

"He left a few minutes ago with Gib—that's Ranger Gib Scott."

"And the poor child's mother?"

"She's not here yet. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to

get these maps finished. It's very important." She turned back to the table.

Mahdesian studied her hips again. "Thank you," he said softly. "Perhaps you'll let me interview you later."

Sid Beal hurried in. "Oh, there you are," he said. "I can see I'm going to have to keep an eye on you if I know what's good for me."

Mahdesian strolled over to the counter and sat down. "Coffee," he told Hoffman as the lodge owner stuck his head inquiringly out of the kitchen.

Beal joined him. "What'd you find out?"

"Nothing—except that they raise toothsome youngsters in these hills."

"Quit it, George. Stick to business."

"With me, pleasure is a business."

Beal glanced down the room to where Alys worked over the maps. "Doesn't strike me that you made much of an impression."

"I haven't even tried yet. Not bad, huh?" He winked over his coffee cup at Beal. "What'll you bet that I can make her?"

"And how the hell would you expect to prove it—with pictures?"

"No, she's not the type to fall for the pin-up routine. You'll have to settle for a pair of her monogrammed panties. Or take my word for it, with full description, of course."

Beal chuckled. "Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you, boy?"

"Simple matter of propinquity and sexual radiation. She's got that dissatisfied look I dearly love. Something's bothering her and what more natural than that she turn to me in her time of troubles? How about it—want to risk ten bucks that I lay her before this thing is over?"

Beal considered Alys once more. "Okay, chum—I'll back maidenly virtue. Just to see you fall flat on your face."

"You got your money riding on the wrong filly." Mahdesian paused. "Of course, there's an 'if' goes along with the bet. That's if they don't find the kid before to-night."

Sheriff Thoreau had brushed off the reporters earlier not because of any distaste for publicity but rather because he feared that they might ask questions to which he didn't know the answers. Thoreau had learned that it was better to say nothing to the press than to say the wrong thing.

He congratulated himself now on his prudence as, at the station wagon outside, Restibo filled him in on the latest developments. These concerned principally the identification of Janie Cooper's compass-telescope and the consequent re-routing of the search parties.

"Where's the father?" he inquired.

"He went out with Gib to rendezvous with the Devilgut half of the posse at the meadow."

"Oh," Thoreau frowned. "Hold on. Rendezvous at the meadow? My orders were that the Red section cut over Breadloaf and join up with the other force."

"Yes, sir," Restibo said reluctantly, "but Gib felt it would be easier and quicker if they came back the other way, even though on the map it look —"

"You mean that you let the ranger countermand my instructions?" Thoreau demanded angrily. "Why wasn't I consulted?"

"Well, Gib knows the country better than any of us, and it was a question of time."

"It is not a question of time. It is a question of discipline. I can see we're going to have to straighten a few things out around here."

Restibo said mildly, "It's not too late if you want to get on the radio."

"That's not the point. The point is I'm in charge and people have got to realize it. Particularly that ranger. Why

doesn't he ever stick around here where he's needed, anyway?"

• It was a criticism that could be levelled with more justice at Thoreau himself than at Gib Scott. However, Restibo was not the one to level it. He said merely, "Gib is trying to round up an old prospector who's familiar with the country. He thinks we need more manpower."

"For once he's right," Thoreau grumbled. "Practically the middle of the morning and we still haven't got this thing off the ground. Those horses will be so tired and dirty they won't be worth showing in the rodeo at all." He noted Restibo's peculiar expression and added hastily, "Of course, the girl is the important thing."

After a moment, Restibo said, "There are some other possibilities that we haven't talked about. The Marines, for instance."

"Yeah." Then Thoreau shook his head. "No, they're having those big manoeuvres off the coast. I doubt if they could spare us any men. How about the state forestry fire departments? Their men would be good on a job of this sort, it seems to me."

"They would—but they got that big blaze up on the San Bernardino county line. Even if they've got it under control by now, they'll be so tired——"

The sheriff glanced towards the lodge. The two photographers were sitting on the steps, smoking cigarettes. He regarded them speculatively. "Might make a public appeal for volunteers," he mused. "With the week-end coming, we could probably pull in two, three hundred men."

"And we'd end up having to look for half of them. This isn't Boy Scout country."

"Well, what's your idea?" Thoreau snapped. "All I seem to get from you is objections."

"The Honour Ranch is only about a dozen miles down the highway," Restibo suggested quietly.

Thoreau blinked. "You crazy or something? I should

turn a bunch of convicts loose to look for the kid? Brother!"

"They're not convicts, at least not exactly. Sure, they're prisoners but they're the reformable ones, mostly petty crimes. I don't say it's the best answer in the world, but we do need more men and here's a source of disciplined manpower close at hand."

"No, sir," declared Thoreau firmly, his imagination black with adverse headlines. "I'm not going out on any limb like that. I never did go for this Honour Ranch baloney, anyway. You got to treat them rough, that's the only answer. Suppose one of them did find the girl—who knows what he might do to her?" He shook his head. "I'm not going to have any potential killers out looking for Janie Cooper, and that's for sure."

Calvin Lowry fired. The grey squirrel, halfway up the stunted pine tree, tumbled head over heels to the ground. Lowry did not go to pick up his victim. He was satisfied that his nerves were steady and that the events of the past twenty-four hours, including no sleep, had not impaired his aim. If only he had not missed his shot at the girl on the previous afternoon . . . but he had been rattled. He would not miss the second time.

Fell Laughlin had parted from him shortly after they plunged into the tangle of Devilgut, leaving Lowry to follow the meandering course of Linger Creek to its junction with Coachella Creek. He turned north now, paralleling the latter stream towards the spot where he had discovered Janie's footprint.

He urged his horse to greater speed, knowing that he was on the right track. A few more hours, perhaps even less, and it would all be over. A single shot, unheard by anyone but the two of them, a well-hidden grave in the wilderness, and he would have nothing to fear. The disappearance of

Janie Cooper would go down in man's memory as just one more among the thousands of unsolved mysteries. If Lowry regretted anything, it was that no one would ever know of his cunning and finesse. But that was unavoidable. At least, *he* would know and that would have to suffice. He felt confident and content as he rode along. He even hummed a little, a tune popular in his college days when all had been right with the world.

He was nearly to the bend of the creek where he had discovered the footprint. Suddenly, he stopped humming and began to frown as he detected the presence of others, close by. Horses were coming downstream, towards him. Lowry reined in his own mount and looked quickly from one side to the other, seeking a detour that would allow him to avoid these strangers.

But there was none and immediately the newcomers came into sight, two riders in khaki uniforms. Lowry recognized them as deputies, part of the posse which had been sent to comb Devilgut. He put on a cordial smile. "Hi, there. Having any luck?"

The deputies were surprised to see him. They pulled up beside Lowry, giving him the quick, hard inspection of the law. "What are you doing here?" one of them demanded.

"The same as you chaps. Looking for the child. My name's Lowry."

One of the deputies said to the other, "Seems to me I saw him back at the lodge. Friend of the ranger, or something."

"That's right," Lowry agreed. "Ranger Scott is the man who sent me out here. He figured that Devilgut is so intricate that you could use some help, someone who has been in here before."

The deputies didn't seem particularly impressed. One of them said, "You can go back with us, then."

"Go back?" Lowry echoed, startled.

"We just got the word." The deputy patted his handie-

talkie. "The girl didn't come this way at all. They found one of her toys over in the other direction, down Miner's Gap. We've all been ordered that way."

Lowry felt his heart sink. He knew exactly what the deputy was talking about. There was every reason in the world why he should. Last night he had carefully placed Janie's telescope along the Miner's Gap trail for this very reason, to draw the search parties in the wrong direction. But he had not anticipated being drawn along with them. Weakly, he said, "Why, that's splendid."

"Come on," the deputy with the handie-talkie ordered. "We got to get moving."

There was nothing for Lowry to do but to wheel his horse around and fall in behind the two men. Caught in my own trap he thought bitterly, as every step took him farther away from his quarry. What am I to do now?

The answer was obvious: somehow he must detach himself from his companions and thus become free to carry out his pursuit of the child. Yet he must do this without arousing their suspicions or even in such a manner that would cause them to comment about him later. But how?

His horse stumbled, giving him the answer. The deputies looked around as Lowry halted the horse and swung to the ground. "What's wrong?"

He pretended to be examining the beast's left foreleg. "Looks to me like he's picked up a stone or something. Steady, boy, let me look at it."

One of the deputies reined his mount around as if coming back to assist when the handie-talkie crackled, "Red leader to Red Three and Six. Where are you guys? We're waiting."

"We're Six," muttered the other deputy. He held the rectangular radio box to his head. "Red leader from Red Six. We're coming."

"Well, snap it up," advised the metallic voice.

Lowry suggested: "If you're late, why don't you ride on?"

"I'll catch up just as soon as I find out what's bothering my horse."

The deputies hesitated, glancing at each other, and then one of them nodded. "Okay, we'll keep moving. We'll probably still be at the meadow when you get there. If not, you know which way to take."

"That's right," Lowry agreed. He watched them ride off down the trail and when they had disappeared around a bend of the stream he began to smile.

He remounted and turned his horse's head upstream. The path was clear now. Meeting with the deputies had almost proved disastrous but, through his superior intelligence, he had succeeded in turning the encounter to his advantage. Now he knew, without any doubt, that the search was headed in the wrong direction. And, even more, that no one stood between him and Janie Cooper.

All the long way up from the city, the tyres had whispered a dirge against the concrete. Lost, lost, lost . . . It had persisted, no matter how hard she trod against the accelerator, until Esther Cooper had been ready to scream at it to stop, that Janie was all right, that she had to be all right.

But she did not scream, even though she was alone in the car and there would have been no one to hear her. Screaming was not her way, nor were tears. Instead, she clenched her hands tightly on the steering-wheel and stared fixedly at the highway as it rushed towards her and disappeared beneath the wheels. Her face, tanned and handsome at forty, was almost masklike; a stranger, glimpsing it, would not know of the desperation that writhed behind it.

Lost, lost, lost . . .

Esther Cooper had never been one to parade her emotions openly. The reserve that was her armour was also her prison. It had caused others to accuse her of not feeling deeply, of not caring. Even Matt had said so, in their final

recriminations before he moved out. But it was not true, although something within her—perhaps the fruit of a loveless childhood—kept her from the others. No one had sensed this, not even her husband, and gradually all that was dear to her had drifted away.

All, that is, except Janie. Only with her daughter had Esther been able to unbend, to pour forth the vials of warmth and tenderness that were so inexplicably stoppered for the others. And when it had appeared that everything else was being taken away from her, she had clung with even greater fierceness to the child, telling herself that this was all that mattered. Family, friends, even husband—let them go, as long as she had Janie.

Lost, lost, lost . . .

For a time, she had allowed the radio to play, simply for the sake of having a sound in her ears other than the insidious chant of the ties. But the constant news bulletins that poured forth, no matter how she twisted the dials, had been even worse.

"No progress has yet been reported in the search for a ten-year-old girl, daughter of a Southern Californian manufacturer, lost since yesterday in the rugged Encanto Mountains. The child, who wandered away from her father's camp during the afternoon . . ."

She didn't wander away, Esther Cooper thought bitterly. Janie never wandered anywhere in her life, even as a baby. I was always there to watch over her, to protect her. And the very first time I wasn't there . . . Mat with his fine talk of my not caring—he is the one who didn't care, not even enough to stay awake while his own daughter—my daughter!—was . . .

The sign and the pointing arrow appeared ahead: Hannah Crossing 1 m.. She turned on to the dirt road and, despite herself, began to tremble slightly, knowing that she was nearly to her destination and dreading what might be waiting for her there. Peering through the windshield, she saw

the cluster of buildings loom up ahead. Slowing the automobile, she threaded her way through the maze of haphazardly parked cars and horse trailers, all empty, and stopped in front of the largest building, a rambling pitched-roof structure that proclaimed itself to be Al's Place.

No one came to greet her. In the parking lot, a Coast Guard Helicopter squatted like an ugly yellow bird, unattended, and near it stood a station wagon, sprouting a tall aerial. In the station wagon, his back to her, a short black-suited man sat talking into a microphone. Since he was busy, she did not approach him. Instead, she mounted the steps of the lodge, a tall and slender woman, well-groomed in her tailored suit.

She hesitated in the doorway, looking around with a faint hope. A buzz of conversation hung in the air. Several men sat at the counter, smoking and drinking coffee and there was a girl working on some papers at a table and at the far end of the lodge a man was speaking into the wall telephone. But she did not see the face she sought and a great weariness descended upon her like a cloak.

One of the men at the counter glanced around and discovered her. His face brightened and he sprang up. "Hi," he exclaimed eagerly. "Two to one, you're the mother. You Mrs. Cooper?"

"Yes." She searched their eyes for a clue. "Is there—have you found her?"

"Come right over here and sit down, Mrs. Cooper." He had her elbow, guiding her towards an empty table. "My name's Mahdesian. From the *Press-Examiner*." The man at the telephone said hastily, "I'll call you back," and hung up. They all converged on her, and Esther saw that two of them were carrying cameras.

"Please," she said, "would somebody tell me——" A flash-bulb went off, blinding her. "Oh!" Everyone seemed to be asking her questions but not answering her own, which confused her.

"When did you hear about your daughter, Mrs. Cooper . . . ?"

"Is this the first time she has been lost, Mrs. Cooper . . . ?"

"Is there any truth to the report that you and your husband . . . ?"

A plump man in a broad-brimmed hat pushed into the forefront of her vision. He was scowling. "Break it up," he advised the others. "You'll have your chance in a minute. Mrs. Cooper, I'm Sheriff Hank Thoreau. I'm in charge of looking for your daughter."

She knew then that Janie had not been found and she was conscious of how tired she was. She murmured, "Then you still don't know."

"We're making progress," Thoreau said comfortingly. "We're on the right track. The posse has found one of her toys."

"Oh." She swayed slightly and saw the photographers raise their cameras alertly, as if they expected her to collapse right in front of them. Keeping an iron grip on herself, Esther said, "If I could just sit down for a minute—it was a long drive . . ."

The reporter, Mahdesian, said quickly, "Sheriff, step right in next to Mrs. Cooper and let us get a picture of the two of you."

The girl Esther had noted working at a nearby table elbowed them all aside angrily. "Leave her alone," she commanded, making a shooting motion with her hands. "Can't you see that she shouldn't be bothered now? Haven't you any feelings at all?"

The men hesitated and, rather surprisingly, it was Mahdesian who sided with the girl. "You're absolutely right. Mrs. Cooper, I apologize for all of us. We just got carried away. Come on, men, and let the lady catch her breath."

Esther looked around gratefully at all of them and particularly at the girl who had rescued her. She was a pretty

young thing, she thought, something like Janie will look at her age. "Thank you," she murmured.

The girl took her arm as the men retreated. "I'm Alys Hoffman. Your husband asked if I wouldn't, well, sort of look after you."

"Oh." It occurred to her then to wonder about Matt. "Where is he?"

"Out with the search parties. He should be back any time." Alys studied her sympathetically. "How do you feel?"

"I'm all right. A little tired, that's all."

"Come on with me." Alys took her arm, steering her out on to the porch. "I have a room back of the lodge all fixed up for you. I think you'll be better off there. At least, you won't have to put up with them." She jerked her head towards the reporters.

"Yes, I'd much prefer to be by myself. But if something happens, the least bit of news——"

"I'll see that you're called."

To the rear of the lodge several small cabins had been attached over the years, each with its own outside door. Alys unlocked one of them. "This is yours for as long as you need it. My own room is right next door to you. And there's a buzzer beside the door. If you need me, just ring."

Esther looked about her. It was a small room, crowded by the double bed and dresser. But it looked comfortable and, at the moment, restfully inviting. She murmured, "You're being very kind."

"We're all just doing what we can to help."

Esther caught her arm as she turned to leave. "Do you think that——" she began and then stopped, knowing that putting the fear into words would cause her to break down completely.

Alys said slowly, "There are a lot of fine men out there, doing everything in their power to bring Janie back to you. We're all praying for her, Mrs. Cooper."

Esther Cooper stood by the door after Alys had gone. She no longer heard the tyres' mournful song but now the silence seemed almost as frightening. She nearly punched the buzzer to call back the girl and cling to her and be comforted. But she did not. Kind as she had been, Alys Hoffman was still a stranger. She had to get some rest and compose herself, find her strength within herself. That was what she had always done. Yet now, in the supreme crisis of her life, was that enough?

We're all praying for her . . .

Slowly, almost unwillingly, Esther Cooper sank to a sitting position on the floor and leaned her forehead against the mattress. Then, awkwardly, since it represented a partial surrender, she began to pray.

Janie Cooper was also praying and with equal awkwardness, though this did not spring from any inner reluctance. She desperately wanted to pray; the only trouble was that she didn't know how. Prayer had never been stressed by her parents, beyond the simple rhyme of "Now I lay me down to sleep", and her attendance at Sunday School had been sporadic. Lacking words of her own, she strove to recall something she had been taught and finally remembered the 23rd psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . As the majestic cadence came back to her, she was heartened by its appropriateness. It could have been written especially for her predicament.

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures," she said aloud. "He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

She wasn't sure of the exact meaning of this but the idea was comforting, that somewhere Somewhere, no matter how invisible and intangible, was guiding her. "Yea, though

I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . .” And it was true that she walked through a valley, and had been all morning, without ever glimpsing the familiar landmarks that always seemed just beyond the next stand of trees.

Now, with the sun well past the meridian, Janie knew that she was completely lost. Even a roundabout course would have brought her home by this time, had she been heading in the right direction. She halted often to rest and each time arose seemingly more weary than when she had stopped.

“Thou preparest a table before me . . .”

She was more than tired; she was also hungry and thirsty. It had been nearly twenty-four hours since she had eaten. For her ten-year-old stomach, unused to privation of more than an hour or so, this seemed like an eternity. Several times she had debated devouring some of the berries that grew among the underbrush. But she had been warned of possible poisoning and, as yet, her fear was greater than her hunger. Nor had she come across any water since leaving Coachella Creek back in the midst of Devilgut.

“ . . . in the presence of mine enemies.”

This reminded her of the Professor and she shuddered a little at the memory. But yesterday's terror, like yesterday's lunch, seemed remote. She could scarcely believe now that the danger had been real. It seemed more like a bad dream and, measured against her very real predicament of being lost, tended to fade away in importance. If the Professor had been chasing her, surely he had given up by this time!

“Thou anointest my head with oil . . .”

Involuntarily, Janie touched her forehead and found it hot to her fingers. Had she possessed a mirror, she would have discovered her face to be sunburned. But like many modern children, over-doctored and over-imaginative, Janie was something of a hypochondriac and now she thought, I must have a fever; maybe I'm going to be sick.

The idea of becoming ill out in the wilderness, far from the tender ministrations of her mother, frightened her even more. I might die, she thought piteously, and Mother will never know. She closed her eyes to keep back her tears and thought she could see her room at home with its big soft bed, scene of her childhood sicknesses, and her mother looking down at her with loving concern. For an instant, it seemed so real that Janie believed she was home. But when she opened her eyes, only the grey-green of the forest surrounded her.

"The Lord is my shepherd," she began again, and gradually the desolate feeling subsided and she wiped away her tears. It's certainly not going to help any to cry, she told herself, setting her jaw determinedly in an expression that made her look a good deal like her mother. The Lord will help me, all right, but I guess I've got to do something, too.

She had come in her wanderings to the base of the mountain which she had glimpsed across the valley from the crest of Silent Ridge. Silver Peak was the mountain's name, although Janie didn't know it. Perhaps, she decided, if she would climb up where she could see, she would discover the proper path to follow back to her camp. At the very least, she might be able to spot some water to drink.

It was apparently the right decision because, almost immediately, she intersected something that resembled a trail winding up the mountainside. Janie followed it. It was harder, walking uphill, and she took off her red jacket and tied the sleeves around her waist.

A hiss at her feet made her stop short, trembling. A rattlesnake? Where? Then she saw it, eighteen inches of mottled scales emerging from a crevice in the rocks. She shook with relief when she saw its legs. The alligator lizard crept across the trail, jaws parted threateningly. With angry dignity, it refused to deviate even for Janie's feet, crawling directly across her shoes. She watched the last of its tail recede under

a bush. "That old lizard," she said. "Acts like he owns the place." She tried to laugh about her fright but it choked in her throat. She trudged on upwards.

Presently, she came upon a considerable clearing. There were several tunnels running into the heart of the mountain which she recognized as mine shafts. But they were old and long deserted, the timbers crumbling and awry. She peeped into one or two but did not go any farther as they looked dark and mysterious. She continued on.

The path grew easier, the brush more scanty, and at last she glimpsed the summit ahead. In a few minutes, she encouraged herself, I'll be on top and I'll be able to see for miles. Maybe I can even see all the way back to our camp and then I won't be lost any more.

There was another clearing just below the summit of the mountain, but this appeared the work of nature rather than man. The ground was almost bare rock here without even enough soil for pine trees to take root. In the middle of this bare expanse yawned the black mouth of a natural cave, irregularly shaped and unlike the forgotten mine shafts below. It was here that the trail led, and went no farther.

Janie hesitated. But the sun, baking down upon her without the kindly intervention of the trees, was intolerable and the cave promised cool shade. Warily, she climbed to the entrance and peered in. She saw nothing in the blackness.

"I guess it's all right," she reassured herself aloud. "I'll just sit down here a minute and——"

Suddenly every part of her body seemed to congeal, as from the darkness within a sound came to answer her. It was a low mumbling, as if she had inadvertently awakened the evil spirit of the mountain itself. And immediately afterwards, she heard another sound, a soft shuffling noise as something large began to move towards her out of the cave.

Her trembling legs could not move to run. She knew she

was doomed. Janie screamed and closed her eyes and waited for the something to seize her.

They kept silent most of the ride back. They had dispatched the Red—or Devilgut—section of the posse down Miner's Gap to join up with the Blue section and, following that, had ridden up Breadloaf for another fruitless visit to Ritchie's camp. Afterwards, there had been no reason to linger and so they turned reluctantly back towards Hannah Crossing.

Both men would have preferred to be riding in the other direction. The struggle within him had been apparent on Matthew Cooper's face as he watched the posse disappear into Miner's Gap. His daughter was somewhere out there and, though logic dictated that he remain behind, it was sheer torture to obey.

Gib Scott chafed equally at being left behind, though his motives were slightly different. Unlike Cooper, he had no overwhelming personal reason to find the little girl, any more than any other human being who might be lost. But that was his country out there, his domain, his responsibility. The idea that it was now to be invaded by strangers, no matter how worthy their mission, filled him with a vague uneasiness. If only he could be there with them, guiding their activities, making sure that nothing went wrong . . . But he couldn't. Restibo was right. Because the sheriff was incompetent, he was chained to this lodge, the command post. It had even been somewhat of a dereliction of duty to absent himself for this short period.

Yet what if the posse, through carelessness and lack of his watchful eye, should . . . Gib had warned them sternly about the fire hazard. At the height of the dry season, high temperature plus low humidity, the mountains were like tinder, awaiting only a spark to turn them into a raging inferno. A discarded match, an untended camp-fire, a

smouldering cigarette—any of these would be enough. Like most men who lived among the mountains, fire was Gib's greatest fear, his constant enemy. The deputies, on the other hand, were mainly city dwellers without his hard-won sense of vigilance. They couldn't realize how quickly fire could change from a worthy servant into an overpowering master. Minutes, even seconds, were vital. With him on the scene, he could be relatively confident that an accident would not turn into a holocaust. But with him miles away, linked to the posse only by radio, anything might happen.

And he felt nakedly out of touch with his fire-towers. He had radioed them all the first night from his short-wave transmitter in the ranger station to be on the look-out for a little girl. But since Janie had not been reported by the nearest tower—White Peak—he didn't expect her to be located by any of the others which were far beyond a child's capacity to wander. This morning he had instructed the fire-towers to stay off the air except in case of emergency. Radio played tricks in the mountains and their tower-to-tower chats might interfere with the unpredictable handie-talkies carried by the posse. Yet he missed talking to his staff—mostly retired adventurous souls who enjoyed a solitary life—and he chafed at this interruption in the routine of his guardianship.

Stop your worrying, he admonished himself sternly. You're getting to be a neurotic. Nothing is going to happen. The posse is on the right track. They'll find Janie before long and it'll all be over. Though Gib did not quite realize it, he was viewing Janie's rescue more as a solution to his own problems than an objective vital in itself.

Thus, it was in a rather depressed mood that he finally reined in before Al's Place and swung stiffly to the ground. More cars had arrived during their absence and Gib saw people he did not recognize, men and women and a few children. They regarded him and Cooper with evident curiosity.

"I guess the story's got around," Gib muttered. He knew that this represented only the first trickle of what promised to be a flood. The presence of these thrill seekers, gathering like vultures, increased his general irritation. "Stay away from the horses," he warned one of the children who had come closer, and the child—a girl—backed hastily away.

Cooper remained seated on his horse, too weary to dismount, and stared at the little girl as if seeing his missing daughter in her. Gib said, "I'm going inside," and entered the lodge. It too was more crowded than when he had left. Al Hoffman puttered happily behind the counter, which was filled, and some of the clientele had overflowed to the tables. Gib didn't see Alys.

Restibo hailed him. "Gib, over here." He was standing in front of the big wall map with a bulky man in semi-western garb, and Gib guessed instantly that this was the sheriff. He crossed to join them.

Restibo made the introductions and they shook hands, each man surveying the other somewhat hostilely. Since they had both formed prior opinions of the other, it was not surprising that they saw nothing in this first meeting to change those opinions. To Gib, the sheriff appeared a pompous bungler; to Thoreau, the ranger appeared a dangerous challenger of his authority.

Thoreau set the tone of their relationship with his first words. "Where the hell have you been?"

Gib stiffened. He had no desire to be drawn into an open quarrel with the sheriff but he didn't intend to be trampled on, either. "I was getting the posse re-routed down Miner's Gap. After that, I went up on Breadloaf to look for a prospector I figure might help us."

"I've been looking for you since daybreak," Thoreau said, which wasn't strictly true. "Seems to me you took your time about getting together."

"I didn't realize you considered it so important."

"Maybe I didn't at first. But when I found out that you were taking it upon yourself to countermand my orders, I figured that we'd better get a few things straightened out."

"Such as?"

"Such as who's running this show, for instance."

Restibo intervened quickly to prevent the imminent explosion. "I don't think there's any argument there, sheriff. The only reason Gib changed your orders was because you were out of touch for the moment and it was a case of time counting. We're all in this together. It's the results that matter." Before either man could disagree, he changed the subject. "Gib, did you find Ritchie?"

Gib accepted Restibo's peacemaking with a shrug. "No. He still hasn't come back to his camp. I can't understand it. I'll probably catch the dickens from him when he does. I untied his burro last night so it could forage and it was gone, too."

"Well, rich ore has been found by following wandering burros," Restibo said. "But I wish you'd found the old man."

"How long has this Ritchie been missing?" Thoreau demanded and was told. He flicked an eyebrow. "About the same time as the girl, huh? Maybe that's significant."

"In what way?"

"Well, an old man missing at the same time as a little girl . . . I've seen some of these old galoots. I wouldn't trust them with a dead sheep, let alone with a kid. Hell, we have these cases all the time."

"What are you talking about?" Matthew Cooper asked sharply. Unnoticed, he had come in from the porch to join the little group before the map in time to hear the end of Thoreau's cruel theory. "Are you suggesting that——"

"Oh, no—not really." Thoreau coughed in embarrassment. "I was just speculating, that's all. I don't believe for a minute——"

"I agree absolutely. Old Man Ritchie is a cantankerous

cuss but he's no sex criminal." Yet Gib could not resist driving the barb deeper into Thoreau. "However, if there's any doubt in your mind, sheriff, we can call off the search for Janie and concentrate on finding the old man."

Thoreau flushed. "We'll do nothing of the sort. I was only trying to think of every angle, no matter how far-fetched. The search goes on as before, period." He swung around and frowned intently at the big map as if he had never seen it before.

Gib saw Alys appear from the direction of the kitchen. She discovered them at the same time and hurried across the room. But her attention was directed at Cooper, not him. "Mr. Cooper, your wife is here. I promised to tell her when you got back."

The news seemed to increase Cooper's fatigue. "I'll tell her myself," he said heavily. "Where is she?"

"Let her use one of the rooms around the back. Number two. She seemed very tired and I thought if she could lie down for a while——"

"Thanks," Cooper murmured. He walked away as if each step were an effort.

Gib would have liked to say something to Alys but she did not linger. He watched her walk back to the kitchen, to be intercepted on the way by a tall young man in a sports shirt. Gib did not know him but Alys apparently did. She stopped to talk. Something the man said made her smile and Gib felt a pang of resentment. She could at least have said hello, he thought; that wouldn't have killed her. He turned back to the sheriff and Restibo.

"—Helicopter will go out with the food and maps in about an hour," Thoreau was saying, tapping the map with his forefinger. "By that time, the posse should have reached this area here—Stovepipe Gorge—and we can make the drop there before they fan out all over the place."

"Hold it," Gib said quickly. "Not Stovepipe Gorge."

"Why not?" demanded Thoreau, frowning. "It's the

logical spot. I wouldn't even be surprised if that's where they'll find the girl. You can see it on the map."

"The orders have already gone out, Gib," Restibo said. "Unless there's some really good reason——"

"There is. What you can't see on the map is that Stovepipe Gorge is crawling with rattlers. All those men and horses in there will stir them up, sure." Gib shook his head. "The helicopter will have to make the drops to the individual teams."

"That's exactly what I was driving at earlier," Thoreau snapped. "If you'd been here to give us your expert advice, instead of out roaming around the countryside . . . Why, your way will tie up the helicopter all afternoon and I've already promised the photographers they could get some aerial shots."

"Any horse that goes into Stovepipe is likely to come out as a snakebite case. A couple of men on foot would be okay but horses don't wear boots. Naturally, it's up to you—they're your horses. It's my opinion, though, that we've got enough trouble already."

Thoreau chewed his lip. "The horses," he said, half-aloud. "All right. I'll go tell them to stay out of the place, except for, say, two men on foot. That satisfy you?" He stalked out of the door headed for the radio control car.

"See what I meant?" Restibo murmured.

"Yeah. But I don't know how much of each other we're going to be able to take." Gib had held his temper but the anger seethed inside him, seeking some outlet. Down the long room, Alys was sitting at one of the tables, still talking to the stranger in low and—what appeared to Gib—intimate tones. Purposefully, he walked across to where they sat.

"Sounds like fun," Alys was saying as he loomed up in front of them. She glanced at him, surprised. "Oh, hi, Gib."

"You get the maps finished?" he inquired curtly, ignoring the greeting.

"Just a few minutes ago. I gave them to——"

"Then do you suppose I could get a little lunch?"

Alys' eyes flashed at his brusque tone. "I suppose you could," she told him, sweetly sarcastic. "If you will turn to your left and walk six paces, you'll find a counter. There are empty stools there. Take any one you like and, if you have money to pay for it, I wouldn't be at all surprised that you can buy a meal, just like anyone else."

"Thank you," he retorted and wheeled away. But he did not go to the counter. He didn't feel hungry. He didn't feel any way except frustrated and furious. He went out the door instead.

As he went he heard the man—and who the hell was he, anyhow?—say with a chuckle, "Sounds like a jealous suitor type." And he heard Alys' answer, increasing his anger: "Gib? Oh, he's just a ranger, that's all."

Matthew Cooper found the door number 2 and knocked. Within, his wife's voice asked huskily, "Who is it?"

"Matt," he told her through the panel but when he tried the knob he found it was locked. It did not surprise him; it seemed, in a way, typical of their entire relationship. He had always tried to open the door that somehow stood between them and always found it locked. Until finally, he had no longer cared to try.

She admitted him, standing aside so he did not come too close, her eyes cold and penetrating. It occurred to Cooper how he must look, unwashed and unshaven, needing both sleep and a change of clothes. Esther, however, looked much as she always did, crisp and well-groomed. Only her face seemed strange, as if the impervious mask she generally wore had been twisted slightly askew, to-day, exposing a bewildered and frightened stranger beneath it.

"You haven't found her." She said it, not as a question, but as a statement of fact.

"No," he agreed simply. "I haven't found her."

"Then why are you here? Why aren't you out looking for her?"

Cooper sighed. "I should be. But they won't let me."

"Yes, you should be!" She faced him like an accusing judge. "You were the one who did it. You lost her. You're the one responsible for what's happened to Janie."

He nodded. "Yes."

"How could you?" she asked, between her teeth. "How could you do this to her? Never mind me, never mind about anything else. She was your daughter and you let this happen to her! You, the man who was always so right about everything, who always knew all the answers. What I should do and what I shouldn't do. I failed you—that's what you told me. I let you down. Well, Matt, perhaps I did. But I never let Janie down. You were the one who did that."

Cooper took the denunciation, unflinchingly. It was even, in a way, something of a relief to hear another person put into words what he himself had been feeling.

Esther stared at him, breathing a little faster. "I could kill you," she whispered.

"I wish you would," Cooper said slowly. "If Janie doesn't come back, it would be easier for me than trying to live with it. You're right, Esther—it was my fault, all of it."

"Then why aren't you out trying to find her?" Her voice rose almost to a shout.

"I told you. They won't let me. They don't think I'm competent enough to help. I can't blame them." Cooper's mouth quirked. "The only consolation I've got is that I made the handie-talkies they're using. That much of me is out there, anyway. But it's not enough."

"I should hardly think so," she murmured, sinking to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. She still faced him. "Janie is lost and all you can talk about is your precious machinery. What sort of a man are you, anyway?"

He merely shook his head, not replying, because he agreed with her so completely. Esther seemed to have nothing more to say, no more names to call him, so after a moment he groped for the door handle. "I'll see that you're informed if anything happens."

"You're going? Just like that? Haven't you anything at all to say to me?"

Cooper hesitated. "Not much, I guess. You're right, everything you said about me. But"—again he hesitated—"I kind of hoped that you might take it differently . . ."

"How did you expect me to take it?" she flared. "Should I thank you?"

"No, that's not what I meant. But maybe if—just once—you'd break down a little bit, be a little less inhuman—well, maybe we'd be able to help each other." Cooper sighed. "But I guess that's foolish. We got away from that sort of thing years ago. We're the way we are and there's no changing now, no matter what."

Esther's reply was interrupted by the wail of a siren, drawing near the lodge from the direction of the main highway. She sprang up, paling. "What's that?"

"I think it's the ambulance. Don't worry. I heard they were bringing one up to stand by in case—well, in case anybody needs it." He opened the door. "I'll come back later."

He left her standing beside the bed. When he was a few paces away, he thought he heard Esther call his name and he retraced his steps. But, though he listened for several moments by the closed door, no further sound came and he decided he had been mistaken. But it occurred to him, as he walked slowly away, that he had not heard her lock the door, either, and he wondered if this meant anything or if she had just forgotten.

The helicopter went out on its third swing over the

search area around three o'clock in the afternoon. Its present mission was to deliver to the individual search teams the maps that Alys Hoffman had drawn, and this it accomplished without incident. The posse, Miner's Gap behind it, was in the process of fanning out into the pine and fir forest beyond. By this time, it was apparent to everyone that the search for Janie Cooper was going to take longer than had been hoped this morning. The search teams had found no further trace of the lost child, beyond the discovery of the toy telescope. But the search went painstakingly on, the teams pushing gradually farther and farther into the wilderness of Murray Forest.

George Mahdesian strolled out from the lodge to meet the helicopter as it returned. His friend and rival, Sid Beal, was sitting on the porch, his portable typewriter on his knees as he pounded out his final story for the day for transmission by telephone to the newspaper office in the city.

"My photographer's going to take the car and run his his plates into town," he told Mahdesian. "If your boy has got any he wants to go, tell him to get them ready."

"He's ready now."

"Of course, what I really should do is let you worry about getting your own pictures in. I'm not sure my editor would approve of me helping the *Press-Examiner*." Beal winked. "But I'm such a nice guy, I can't do it."

"Don't let it go to your head."

"Well, I figure I'm a cinch to take ten bucks off you, and that's enough punishment. At least, I don't see you making any progress with the little blonde."

"That's because of the Mahdesian subtlety. I've got her thinking I'm a nice trustworthy guy already. There's a couple of good signs. For one thing she's just thrown over her boy friend, so maybe I got revenge motive working for me. Another thing, she's dog-tired. Get after them when their resistance is low—that's part of my scientific method."

Beal hooted.

"Don't know where I can get my hand on a bottle of hard liquor around this dump, do you? Might need it to oil the wheels of romance."

"Beat it, man of science," Beal went back to his story. Mahdesian found his photographer, whose name was Coston, idly flipping darts at the scarred board near the jukebox. "You got your plates ready to go?"

"Sure. There's nothing else to shoot around here until something new breaks."

"Well, let's get them in the car out in the back. Beal's giving us a break and we don't want his mood to change."

Coston gathered up the black rectangular film holders and the two men headed towards the kitchen. They encountered Al Hoffman. He wore a chef's apron but for the benefit of his customers had also donned a tall sombrero. The effect was a trifle bizarre, almost clownish, although this was not Hoffman's intention. He was attempting to create atmosphere. He greeted the two newsmen happily. "Say, I been meaning to talk to you fellows. How's chances for taking a picture of me?"

"Later," Mahdesian said, trying to push past him.

"I'll pay for it, naturally." Hoffman gave him a confidential nudge. "Wouldn't even be surprised I could find a fifth of something around here if I looked hard enough. That wouldn't be too tough to take after a long day now, would it?"

Mahdesian stopped short and smiled. "Why, thank you. That might go good later on, if you'll just tell me where I can locate the bottle." Then a new but related idea took hold. The burly, bald man represented more than merely an inn-keeper in a ridiculous costume; he also happened to be Alys' father. And what wiler way to ingratiate himself with the unsuspecting daughter than by doing her father a favour? He told Coston, "Go ahead. Take his picture."

"Now?" Coston asked, with a glance towards the door. "What for?"

"We got time. You take Mr. Hoffman's picture—get a good shot—and maybe I'll do a sidebar on him to phone in. Human interest stuff about him and the lodge here."

"Say, that sounds okay," Hoffman exclaimed. "I was just figuring on a picture for my own use, but if you want to—"

"Okay," Coston agreed wearily. "Where do you want him?"

"Behind the counter. Over here. You can angle it to get that deer head in."

Mahdesian manœuvred Hoffman around to the proper position while Coston got his camera set up. Hoffman posed stiffly, smiling fixedly while he continued to talk. "My notion was that I could get some postcards made up. I figure there's going to be quite a demand before long."

"That so?" Mahdesian said absently. "Turn your head a little to the right."

"Sure, there will. I know how these things go. This place is really going to boom from now on, with all the publicity we're getting. Really puts Hannah Crossing on the map."

"Hold it right there. That's good."

"I knew it from the first," Hoffman went on, his posture rigid. "Nobody else saw it, but I did. That's why I ordered all that extra food and stuff. I could see it was going to be a big thing."

The flashbulb silvered the air like lightning and Hoffman blinked. Coston said, "Okay, let's get going before the car leaves."

"You go on," Mahdesian told him quietly. "I want to talk to Mr. Hoffman." He was engulfed by a new and great discovery, the character of Al Hoffman. Coston rushed off through the kitchen, "What was that you were saying about

ordering extra food, Mr. Hoffman? When was this, exactly?"

"Why, the minute I found out the kid was lost—and whose kid she was, naturally. Anybody, could see what was going to happen. Of course, I say anybody could see it but what I mean is anybody with my experience in dealing with the public."

Mahdesian surveyed him with relish, like a collector examining a rare and valuable specimen. The eternal profiteer, he thought, local garden variety. And though he gazed into Hoffman's face, he did not really see him. Instead he saw a column of type, a devastating portrait of simple irony, the sort of penetrating exposé of human nature that he admired in others' work and longed to duplicate in his own. It might even lead him to the daily syndicated column that was his ultimate goal. Yet, even if it didn't, the satisfaction in the story would be sufficient.

Then he remembered Alys and he hesitated. Holding her father up to public ridicule was certainly not the recommended path to her bed. He hated to lose his bet, and not merely because of the money involved. But . . . there were always more women, thousands of them, and a story like this came only rarely.

Then, joyfully, he remembered how far from the city he was. The newspaper with her father's story wouldn't reach the lodge until morning. He still had all night ahead of him.

He sat down at the counter, facing his victim. "So you figure you'll have some postcards made, cash in on the publicity. What other plans do you have?"

"Well," Hoffman mused, "I was thinking of having a big sign made for down at the highway. I don't know what it'd say, something to tie in with the Cooper kid. A lot depends on whether they find her, of course. And then maybe I'll rig up some sort of museum here, charge admission—" He broke off, bothered by something in Mahdesian's face. "Say, you sure you want to hear all this?"

"Oh, yes," Mahdesian assured him earnestly. "I want to hear everything."

From someone, Sheriff Thoreau had learned about Big Ben and he hunted up Restibo at the station wagon to announce his discovery with mournful excitement. "Did you know that there's a big mountain lion roaming around these hills?" he demanded. "A real killer, they tell me."

"If you mean Big Ben, yes, I did know it."

"Well, why didn't you say something? Do I have to dig out everything by myself?"

"I didn't think it was particularly important."

"Not important! Why, the cat was right down here next to the lodge last night—just after the kid disappeared. Put two and two together, man. We could have saved ourselves a lot of work if I'd known this before."

"Pumas aren't mankillers," Restibo pointed out patiently. "Not even old ones. Sure, Big Ben might chew on a dead man but he wouldn't attack a live one, not even a small girl."

Thoreau grunted, his theory punctured. "Well, there's a first time for everything, you know." Then he realized how this sounded and added hastily, "Of course, I'm real glad to hear that. It's not a pretty thought."

Restibo glanced at his watch. "I can't understand why the bloodhounds haven't shown up. It'll be dark before long."

"Weigand said it might take some time."

"But twenty-four hours! If you called him last night—" There was an uncomfortable expression on Thoreau's face and Restibo stopped, struck with a sudden suspicion. He did not put it into words, knowing that, whether he was right or wrong, it would be foolhardy for him, a subordinate, to pursue the matter. But he could not prevent himself from being angry and so he said curtly,

"Well, this delay just points up the fact that we've got to have more men."

"The off-deputies have been called in. They'll be here in the morning."

"That'll only be an extra half-dozen or so when you subtract the ones on sick leave and vacation. That's not enough."

"I was thinking," Thoreau said, "about the Indian reservation."

"That's on the other side of the mountains." Restibo gestured east towards the desert. "Of course, if the search drags on, they could start working towards us—even though it looks like Janie isn't headed that way."

"Well, I don't know what else we can do."

"There's still the Honour Ranch." Thoreau started to shake his head but Restibo continued, "I know there's a certain calculated risk involved—that we might make the department look bad—but how about the alternative? If we don't find Janie—or if we don't find her in time—we're going to look even worse."

It was exactly the right argument to use, he realized, because Thoreau began to frown thoughtfully. "How would you handle it?" he asked finally.

"Bring them over right now—with the supervisors, naturally—and get them lined up to begin searching in the morning first thing. I think they can help us a lot." Restibo paused. "I'd be willing to take the responsibility."

"No," Thoreau said, rather surprisingly. "It's my responsibility and I'll shoulder it. You can call them up and get them over here."

Nothing happened. Though she waited in frozen terror for an unimaginable horror to seize her, it did not occur. And finally Janie cautiously opened her eyes. She nearly screamed again, but more in surprise than in fear this time.

The mumbling sound that had scared her had come from human lips and their owner stood before her in the entrance of the cave. Crouched, rather, body bent almost double, while the face turned up inquiringly towards Janie. It was a wizened brown face, incredibly old, wrinkled like lava. Sparse grey-white hair trailed across the face and from it peered a pair of clouded rheumy eyes that turned slowly this way and that as if seeking the exact location of the visitor. At first, Janie could not tell whether this ancient apparition was a man or a woman but the clothing, a skimpy and ragged mélange of hides and gunny sacking, seemed to resemble a dress.

The old woman continued to mumble with toothless gums, a questioning sound that held no menace. And though Janie did not understand a word of it, she felt an immense relief. The creature before her reminded her of a witch but she was a fellow human being and Janie instinctively sensed that she would do her no harm.

Timidly, she stepped closer and said, "Hi."

The clouded eyes squinted at her and Janie realized that the old woman was nearly blind. She must be a hundred years old, Janie thought with a feeling of awe, maybe even two hundred. She stood still as the old woman shuffled directly to her and reached up to touch Janie's face with the tips of her fingers. Her fingers were gnarled and bony but her touch was feather-like and oddly comforting. "I'm Janie Cooper. I'm lost."

The old woman showed no signs of understanding but replied in a guttural murmur that Janie did not comprehend. She repeated her statement twice with the same results and then it suddenly occurred to her that they were not speaking the same language. That's funny, she thought; everybody here speaks English except maybe . . . "Why, you're an Indian!" she exclaimed with surprised delight, since she had never seen one in person before. "A real live Indian!"

The old woman understood her meaning, at least, because she nodded. Placing a hand on her withered breast, she pronounced slowly the word, "Hemich-cha."

"Hemich-cha," Janie repeated. "Is that your name? Or is it your tribe?"

"Hemich-cha," the old woman said again.

"I guess it must be your name," Janie touched her own chest. "Janie."

"Janie," repeated Hemich-cha, giving it an odd inflection. Thus introduced, they stood there for a moment, smiling at each other, two oddly assorted human beings, each filled with the pleasure of discovery.

"I'm lost," Janie told her. "I ran away from my camp and now I can't seem to find my way back."

But here communication broke down. Hemich-cha repeated their name once again but obviously did not understand her attempts to explain her predicament. Nor did mention of Hannah Crossing, Portal Canyon or even the city seem to hold any significance for her. I guess she must have lived here all her life, Janie thought in discouragement; she doesn't seem to know anything else at all. It was a new experience to her, being unable to make her needs known. In her familiar world of home and family, all her requirements had been quickly met and even anticipated. And now when her plight was so desperate, it was frustrating in the extreme not to be understood. But a comforting thought came to her: If she lives here, she must have something to eat and drink.

She put the question into words and again was met only with the toothless meaningless smile. "Eat," Janie repeated desperately. With a sudden inspiration, she began to pantomime. "Eat. Drink. Water."

At last she was understood, because Hemich-cha nodded vigorously. She shuffled past Janie and began to descend the trail. Hopefully, Janie followed her. Her hope was rewarded. A few hundred yards down the mountain, the

trail branched off, terminating in a rocky declivity from whence a spring gurgled forth, clear and fresh.

Hemich-cha said something in her own tongue and pantomimed the act of drinking. Janie needed no urging. She fell on her stomach and sucked in great mouthfuls of the cool mountain water, drinking until she felt she would burst. Since there was no one to warn her, she drank too much. When she finally stood up, she was seized by violent cramps and began to retch. Hemich-cha stroked her hair soothingly until the nausea passed and Janie could grin feebly.

She drank again, but more sparingly this time, and then followed Hemich-cha up the mountain to the cave. Hemich-cha did not enter but continued on past the summit to a clearing among the scrub oak trees. Janie watched, puzzled, as the old Indian woman hobbled among the bushes that grew here, occasionally bending to tear off a stalk or blossom. Her task finished, Hemich-cha presented the harvest to her and, as Janie regarded it in bewilderment, made eating motions.

One of the stalks held a cluster of small red berries that reminded Janie of Christmas decorations. Because it was most familiar to her, she tried it gingerly. The berries were mealy and somewhat flavourless but wholly palatable and she had reached a point of hunger where she was in no mood to be particular. She finished the toyon berries, munched greedily on some yucca flowers—they reminded her of lettuce—and then attacked a large prickly pear, which she found best of all.

Hemich-cha, meanwhile, continued her harvesting, plucking mesquite beans in their long pods and pausing now and then to burrow in the ground for mariposa bulbs. Janie, her first hunger assuaged, followed her and Hemich-cha allowed her to carry the bulbs, which she wrapped in her red jacket.

The food-gathering complete, Hemich-cha returned to

her cave, with Janie close behind. It was not a large cave, she discovered, little more than a deep cleft in the mountain. It contained none of the comforts of civilized living and Janie thought the smell rather overpowering. Nevertheless, she welcomed its protection as she had never appreciated her own bedroom at home. She would have liked to question Hemich-cha about her existence here alone on the mountain, and the reasons for it, but she could not make the old woman understand. There was no doubt that she lived alone and had for many years. But apparently she sometimes had visitors. While she worked with a crude stone metate to grind the mesquite beans into a flour, Hemich-cha chewed tobacco. The tobacco plug with its yellow paper wrapper was a welcome sign of civilization to Janie, but when she tried to find out where it had come from, Hemich-cha's response was only to offer her a bite. Janie declined with thanks.

Yet the knowledge that someone, at some time in the not too distant past, had come here, bringing supplies to the old Indian woman, gave her spirits a much needed lift. That meant there must be a trail that would lead her to safety. In the morning, she would find that trail. Somehow, she would make Hemich-cha understand.

But now she noticed that the sun once more hovered on the rim of the mountains. Sunset was here and it would soon be dark. Once again, she faced night in the wilderness. But this time she would not be alone.

And, as the second night in the search for Janie Cooper drew near, others watched the vanishing sun. In the eerie moment of twilight hush that fell over the forest, the sinking ball of light became a symbol of human failure. At Hannah Crossing, Matthew Cooper watched it in fear, Gib Scott with impatience, Sheriff Hank Thoreau with annoyance. Chief Deputy Restibo had just reported the day's casualties—one

horse destroyed after suffering a broken leg; one deputy being returned with heat prostration. In the depths of the Murray Forest, the search teams sagged to the ground with aching relief after a blazing and profitless day. In Devilgut, Fell Laughlin swore resignedly.

In the lodge dining-room, George Mahdesian noticed the nightfall because Alys Hoffman came out of the kitchen to turn on the lights. She gave him a troubled glance before returning to help her father, who was whistling cheerfully. In her cabin, Esther Cooper, unable to make herself venture forth among people, sat and watched the drawn curtains fade to squares of darkness.

Of all those who had met together in the Encanto wilderness, Calvin Lowry welcomed the sunset with the purest satisfaction. His emotions sang on taut strings of triumph. He sat in his saddle, too exhilarated for weariness, on the heights of Silent Ridge. Faro Valley lay before him, open forest land where a horse would more than match the footsteps of a fleeing child. He'd had no sleep but he needed none. He was indomitable, as he'd always told himself. It would take him all night to search the valley—but in the morning he would be on top of Silver Peak.

FRIDAY NIGHT

THOSE who had been the first to see the sun arrive over the wilderness that morning were the last to see it leave that night. The ground was cloaked in shadow but in the sky above some traces of the day still lingered. In the Coast Guard helicopter, Lieutenant Copitas and his observer relaxed and drank beer, their day's work nearly done. Inasmuch as the pilot's hands were fully occupied with the stick controls, it was Peck's unofficial duty to act as tin opener and to hold the beer to Copitas' lips on demand.

"Look over there," Peck said, pointing away to the northeast. From the dark expanse of the Murray Forest came a gleam of light, then another. "The search teams are settling down for the night."

"Yeah." As they flew on, more of the campfires showed themselves, glittering like diamonds against black velvet. Copitas shook his head ruefully. "Not for me. How about that, Pappy? An hour from now you'll be relaxing in front of TV with the wife and kids while those poor beggars are swatting mosquitoes."

"Son," Peck said, "with a wife and kids you don't relax."

"Well, get a good night's sleep. We got another date at four-thirty in the morning." Peck slid open the window at his right elbow and tossed the empty beer tins out into the

rushing wind. Copitas said, "Open up another one, Pappy. I got a man-size thirst to-night . . ."

About the same time back at Al's Place in Hannah Crossing, Matthew Cooper was asking Alys Hoffman to sell him a drink of whisky. "I really can't," she told him. "We haven't got a hard liquor licence, you know."

Cooper nodded wearily. "Okay."

He looked so haggard, so in need of succour, that Alys' heart went out to him. "I can't sell you a drink—but I guess there's no law against my giving you one, is there?" She found the bottle her father kept under the counter. "Here—you keep it."

"You're very kind," he murmured. Yet after he had shamled away, Alys was reminded of Gib and her conscience plagued her. She hadn't been particularly kind to him, even to the extent of seeing that his simplest needs were met. When he had wanted lunch, she had turned him tartly away. As far as she knew, he had not had any food at all since breakfast. Impulsively, she made two large sandwiches, thick cuts of ham, and went to seek him.

Gib was sitting in one of the rustic chairs on the porch, head sunk on his chest, booted feet propped on the railing. Alys said softly. "I thought you might be hungry. I fixed some sandwiches for you."

He did not reply and, when Alys looked closer, she found that he was sound asleep, obviously exhausted. She hesitated, wanting to awaken him so she might apologize. But she decided that such an action would be selfish when he needed rest so badly. So she placed the sandwiches where he would find them when he awoke and tiptoed away.

In the stand-by ambulance, Restibo was also asleep, snoring softly on one of the stretchers, while the drivers played cards on the grass outside.

Sheriff Thoreau also courted sleep, but less successfully. He lay in the rear of his station wagon on the inflatable mattress carried for this purpose, listening to the monoto-

nous hum of the radio. He had spoken earlier with the leaders of both the Red and Blue sections of his posse—seven miles away—ordering them to make camp for the night, and they in turn had passed the instructions along to the individual search teams. Thoreau did not anticipate any need for further communication before morning. But his mind, restless, would not relax and so he occupied his time by mentally composing an account of the day's activities. It was not an official account. In fact, it was a somewhat glorified version and others—Restib, for one—might have had a good deal of difficulty in recognizing it. He had several dozen of these note-books at home, carefully filed away, a compilation of which he intended to publish one day as *Memoirs of a Fighting Sheriff*.

Not everyone at Hannah Crossing was asleep or relaxing, however. In her tiny cabin, Esther Cooper walked back and forth between the bed and the door, waiting for and yet dreading the summons she knew would eventually come.

In the lodge dining-room, George Mahdesian huddled close to the telephone, dictating the feature story on the lodge's owner and speaking in a whisper so he would not be overheard.

In the kitchen, Al Hoffman happily counted the day's receipts and looked forward with anticipation to the morrow. Things, he thought, were finally going his way. Today's trickle of curiosity seekers presaged to-morrow's flood when the beginning of the week-end would free so many people from their jobs. And with his picture in the newspaper . . .

And, several miles away, in the depths of Devilgut, Fell Laughlin had at last come across a trail. It was not, however, Janie Copper's trail, nor that of any human being. Laughlin recognized the faint but definable paw prints along the bank of Linger Creek as those of his old enemy. It had been a long and discouraging day but this discovery gave him a thrill of satisfaction. Big Ben's here, he thought, somewhere close by. He drew his rifle from its scabbard. But then he

hesitated. The trail seemed to lead back through country he had already covered in his search for the little girl and to follow it meant turning aside from the main objective. He was nearly up to Silent Ridge.

You don't know she came this way, Laughlin argued with himself. The fact that you haven't met any of the sheriff's men seems to indicate that they were ordered off in another direction. She probably wouldn't cross the ridge into Faro Valley, anyhow; even a kid would be able to see that wasn't the right way. Maybe she's been found by now—there's no way you'd know—and you're not even needed any more. Besides, you owe it to the Ranchers' Association to get rid of Big Ben while you have a chance to.

Laughlin turned his horse around, putting Silent Ridge and Faro Valley and Silver Peak at his back, and began to follow the puma's trail, his rifle ready.

It was now nine o'clock and the search for Jamie Cooper was in a state of suspension on all fronts. But not for long. At nine-fifteen, the bloodhounds, long overdue and long anticipated, finally arrived at Hannah Crossing.

This was the moment he had been waiting for. It had been a long time arriving, weeks that seemed like months, but it was here, at last. Jerry McCurdy lay in the darkness of Bunkhouse 3, staring upwards at the sagging springs of the bunk above him, and counted off the minutes.

Lights had been out for fifteen of those minutes and all around him he could hear the sounds of his fellow-prisoners going to sleep. They weren't supposed to be called prisoners, of course, just like the Honour Ranch wasn't supposed to be called a prison. Rather, they were ranch-hands—or just hands, for short. But that didn't fool anybody, particularly Jerry McCurdy, who knew the score. There weren't any bars on the windows and the guard—pardon me, he thought sarcastically, the foreman—didn't carry a gun. But

it added up to the same thing, somebody else telling him what to do whether he liked it or not. And he didn't like it.

McCurdy was a small sparrow-like man, cynically wise beyond his thirty-one years. He was not the kind who was generally sent to the county's minimum detention road farm, but a hopeful judge had thought he detected signs of possible rehabilitation in him. The judge had been overly optimistic. Jerry McCurdy had no intentions of being rehabilitated; he liked himself the way he was, and had only contempt for the suckers who were taken in by the foreman's fine talk. Let the suckers believe it, let them serve out their time and earn their hearty handshake. Not McCurdy. He was crashing out.

It had taken a bit of planning, which explained why he had remained at the Honour Ranch for as long as he had, two months of a year's sentence for forgery. The foreman made a big point of there being no fence and no locks. "If you want to break out, nobody'll stop you," he told them often. "But if you leave, you can't come back." Who the hell wants to? McCurdy thought. What they didn't mention was that the ranch was miles from anywhere and without a car for the get-away a man on the run was dead before he began.

But now he had it all arranged. Last Sunday, the "family day," he had finally wrung a promise from Dolores. She'd be waiting a mile down the road with clothes for him. The border was only a dozen miles away. By morning, he'd be so far into Mexico they'd never find him.

Another minute, he decided. Then got out of his bunk, put on his shoes, out of the door—and he was gone for ever. If he should meet anybody outside, all he had to do was tell them he was going to the lavatory. The excuse worked; he had practised it earlier in the week.

The bunkhouse was silent now except for heavy breathing and the occasional squeak of springs as someone turned over.

Now! McCurdy thought, and sat up, groping in the darkness for his shoes. So long, suckers—I'll think of you when I'm relaxing in . . .

To his consternation, the bunkhouse lights flashed on. The unexpectedness of it nearly made him shriek with fright. What had gone wrong? How had they found out? As the bunkhouse door was opened, he flung himself back on to his bed and tried to pull the blankets over him, feigning sleep.

"All right, men," the foreman said loudly, striding in. "Everybody up! Come on—hit the deck."

The room came alive with a mingling of groans, curses and questions as the occupants, jerked rudely awake, blinked in the glare of the overhead lights. McCurdy held his breath, waiting for the foreman to come and seize him.

The foreman did not approach him, however. He stood in the centre of the long room. "Sorry to break up your beauty sleep," he announced, "but we've got ourselves a job to do."

"We did our day's work," somebody complained. "Give us a break, won't you?"

"This is something special," the foreman replied and McCurdy began to relax. Despite his fears, this departure from the normal did not concern him, at least not directly. "Men, we just got a call from the sheriff. He needs our help."

Several of the men hooted at this and a number of profane suggestions were voiced, regarding what the sheriff could do. The foreman nodded patiently. "I know, I know—but listen to all of it. There's a little girl—just a kid—who's got lost over here in the Encanto Mountains some place. She's been gone for twenty-four hours or more. They need more men to help look for her. We happen to be close and available and organized. They've asked us to pitch in."

Somebody said, "The sheriff's got deputies, hasn't he?"

"Not enough for this job. I can order you to do this, but

I don't much like to. But it seems to me that a lot of you men have kids of your own—I've seen them up here on family day—so think about them for a minute. How'd you like to have one of your kids lost in those mountains?" He paused and there was a general silence while the prisoners looked at each other. "I can't promise that this will do you any good. But this I do know—it won't do you any harm when the board meets."

"Aw, hell!" someone at the end of the room said. "Let's quit talking and get moving."

"The trucks will be outside in five minutes," the foreman said. He wheeled and went out.

McCurdy laced his shoes thoughtfully, while around him his fellow prisoners struggled into their denim overalls. He was annoyed by the havoc this unexpected development had wreaked with his escape plan. But he had lived a good many years by his quick wits and he prided himself on his adaptability. All was not necessarily lost; it might even turn out to be a blessing in disguise. If all the law enforcement officers in the vicinity were occupied in a search for a child, they would hardly have time to pay heed to a missing prisoner.

"I never saw you look so happy about going to work," his bunk-mate remarked. "You sick or something?"

"What do you mean—work?" McCurdy retorted. "We're going on an errand of mercy. Haven't you got any milk of human kindness?"

When Alys went out on to the porch the second time, Gib was still propped in his chair asleep, the sandwiches untouched. She was turning to go when she discovered the figure of a man sitting under the trees across the road, his back against the trunk. She watched him a moment curiously, recognizing him finally as Matthew Cooper. She was already apprehensive about him and, when he didn't

move, she went down the steps and crossed the asphalt to where he sat.

"You all right, Mr. Cooper?" she inquired. She saw that the whisky bottle was propped between his knees but she could not ascertain how much of the liquor had been drunk.

"I'm all right," he replied and his speech seemed clear enough. "Did you need me for something?"

"No, not really. But when I saw you sitting here—well, I was just a little concerned."

"I see. You've been wondering if you did the right thing, giving me the bottle."

It was so true that Alys had to chuckle with embarrassment. "Well, it wasn't really very smart of me, under the circumstances."

"So you've been worrying that I might get drunk and go riding off on some foolish mission," Cooper said with weary amusement. He held up the bottle. "I've only had one drink, Miss Hoffman, and not a large one at that."

"I apologize," she murmured. "Not that I'd blame you."

"Sit down," Cooper urged, making room for her against the trunk of the oak tree. She obeyed, and noted for the first time how tired she was. "One small drink," Cooper repeated. "I know my limitations, you see. That's one of the two main lessons life teaches you, Alys—you don't mind, do you?—your limitations. I know what I can handle and what I can't. I'd like to get drunk, to be honest with you, just as I'd like to be out there searching for Janie instead of sitting here. But I know better than to do either one. Your ranger was right. My place is here. And since it is . . ."

"I know how hard it is for you, Mr. Cooper."

"It's a bitter lesson, learning that you have limitations at all. When you're young, you don't really believe that there's anything you can't do. Climb a mountain, paint a masterpiece, build a better mouse-trap. Gradually, you learn and you adjust. You accept. You learn to make the

most of what you can do and not cry over what you can't. It's only at times like this that it goes down hard."

Alys nodded, his words impressing her since they seemed to have some connection with herself. "I wonder, though——"

Restibo came striding around the corner of the lodge calling Cooper's name. Cooper shot to his feet. "Over here!" he cried and met Restibo in the middle of the road. "What's happened?"

"Don't get excited. The dogs have finally got here and we figure on taking them up to your camp site as a starting point. Thing is, we've got to get your permission before we use them. Just a formality."

"You've got my permission, of course." Cooper hesitated and then asked. "Would you like me to come with you?"

"Actually, the fewer along the better. There's already four of us, or will be when I locate Gib."

"He's on the porch asleep," Alys called. Restibo tramped off to awaken him. Cooper came back slowly and reseated himself. He took another drink from the bottle, not saying anything. Together, they watched Restibo rouse the sleeping Gib and the two men went off around the lodge to the parking lot. A few moments later they could hear the yapping of the dogs as they were freed from the kennel truck.

Alys asked, "Wouldn't you like to get a little sleep? You must be dead tired."

"I don't really feel like I could sleep. I think I'll just sit here for a while."

Alys hesitated, ready to leave, yet still bothered by what Cooper had said a few moments before. "You were saying that knowing your own limitations was one of two main lessons," she prompted.

"Did I? Well, I guess that's so, though it sort of all boils down to just one. Knowing yourself. Knowing what you're capable of in the first place, and then knowing what's important to you. It's too bad that it takes us so long to find

out. We waste so many years. My own case, for instance—I knocked around a good deal, tried a lot of different jobs, lived in a lot of different places. Always was looking for something and never quite knowing what it was. I guess I really didn't find out until yesterday. I was born in Montana, Alys, a long way from Southern California. Sitting here to-night, it finally came to me that's why I like to come up into the mountains whenever I can—because it reminds me of where I came from. The funny part is that when I was young I couldn't wait to get away from it. Now I've found out that it isn't where you are but what you are that matters."

"I guess you're right," Alys muttered. She knew she did not grasp the full significance of what Cooper was saying and she would have liked to explore it further. But relaxing against the tree trunk had made her so drowsy that she could barely hold her eyes open.

"You'd better get some sleep yourself," Cooper observed as she yawned.

"I suppose. Thanks for talking to me like that, Mr. Cooper."

"I wasn't really talking to you." Cooper shook his head. "I was talking to myself."

The bloodhound pack came charging around the lodge, two teams of them straining at the long leashes held by Restibo and a man Alys didn't recognize. Gib Scott and Sheriff Thoreau followed close behind. They did not see the pair under the oak tree but went off quickly up the trail to Portal Canyon. Alys and Cooper watched them out of sight. "Goodnight," she said finally. "If you should feel like sleeping——"

"I'll just stretch out here." He indicated the bottle. "If you're still worried you can take it with you."

"I'm not worried." Impulsively, she added, "You're going to get Janie back. It's got to happen that way. I know it."

"Thanks," he murmured. "I'll hold on to that thought."

As she passed through the lodge, the two reporters and the cameraman were sitting at one of the tables, playing gin-rummy. Mahdesian rose with a smile and beckoned her to join them but she shook her head and continued on through the kitchen. She heard Beal laugh about something.

Her father looked up from the preparation table where the days receipts were spread. "Biggest day we ever had," he announced proudly. "Took in over three hundred bucks. This keeps up and you won't have to worry about going to Paris next year, sugar."

Alys regarded him. She had a weird sensation that of the two men—the same relative age, the same general appearance—it was Matthew Cooper who was her father really, and not this grinning stranger. She was too tired to think about it, or even to speak. She merely nodded and went into her bedroom, where she fumbled her way out of her shirt and jeans. Suddenly the bureau drawer that held her pyjamas receded to an impossible distance and she fell in her underclothes upon the bed.

The Cooper camp site stood as it had on the previous day, untouched and deserted, a melancholy monument. They did not rebuild the bonfire but used their lanterns to rummage in the tent for some of the missing child's belongings.

"These do?" Gib asked, emerging with two of Janie's dolls.

"Anything the child has worn or handled frequently," Otto Wiggand told him. He was the kennel-master, a fierce little terrier of a man to whom his dogs were the be-all and the end-all of his existence.

"Might as well be on the safe side," Thoreau said, and brought out Janie's suitcase which, after a week's camping, contained mostly dirty clothes. They let the four blood-

hounds, two on a leash, sniff at the dolls and each item of clothing. "That should do it."

"Let's take the dogs over to Miner's Gap and see if they can pick up a strong scent," Gib suggested. "That should be enough to demonstrate whether the dogs are going to do us any good."

Wiegand frowned. "If my hounds get on the trail, they're not going to want to give it up. How far are you prepared to go to-night?"

The other three men looked at each other. Restibo murmured, "I could go back for the horses," and Gib agreed, "We might as well go all the way if we can." But they both waited for Thoreau's arrival. He temporized. "Well, let's wait and see if the dogs pick up anything."

"They will," Wiegand said confidently.

They left the camp, passing out of Portal Canyon into the meadow, swinging north toward the uninviting gash that was the mouth of Miner's Gap. The dogs showed no eagerness, Gib noted, not straining at their leashes but trotting docilely along wherever their master led. But he did not worry, thinking that at this point Janie's scent had been obliterated by the passage of the posse and other searchers.

At the mouth of Miner's Gap, they halted, and Wiegand allowed the hounds to sniff again at one of the dolls. Then, with Restibo holding the second leash, he attempted to lead the dogs into the rocky canyon. To Wiegand's obvious surprise, which they all shared, the dogs balked. Instead of plunging into Miner's Gap, they tugged in the opposite direction, back into the meadow. And, although Wiegand spoke sharply to them, he could not interest them in entering the dark gorge. They finally sat down and refused to move, apparently confused.

"What the hell's wrong with your mutts?" Thoreau demanded disgustedly.

"Nothing is wrong with my hounds. They just haven't picked up any scent here, that's all."

"Try them again," Restibo suggested. "We know Janie went this way."

Wiegand complied but again with negative results. "We'd have been better off sleeping."

"My hounds are never mistaken," Wiegand said between his teeth. "If they won't go into this rock pile, it simply means that there is no scent for them to follow."

The sheriff snorted but, before the argument could develop further, Gib said, "Wait a minute. Let's think about this. What if the dogs are right and there is no trail down Miner's Gap for them to follow?"

Thoreau said scornfully, "We know better. Have you forgotten that the posse found the kid's toy halfway down the canyon? How'd it get there if she didn't drop it—fly?"

"I don't know," Gib admitted. "But I felt from the beginning that Janie wouldn't go down Miner's Gap."

"Well, if we're going to operate on intuition . . ."

"Why don't we try giving the dogs their head—and see where they lead us?" Thoreau and Restibo looked dubious but Gib pressed the point. "After all, we don't have anything to lose except a little sleep. What do you think, Wiegand?"

Wiegand shrugged loftily. "I tell you my hounds are never mistaken."

"Okay," Thoreau surrendered. "Between your dogs and his intuition, I guess facts don't mean a damn thing. Lead on."

Again Wiegand passed Janie's doll under the bloodhounds' noses and turned them back towards the meadow. This time there was no uncertainty, no hesitation. The hounds leaped forward, straining so that Wiegand and Restibo had to trot to keep up with them.

"Ten to one they'll take us right back to their truck," Thoreau panted as he and Gib followed along in their wake.

Gib said nothing, watching the progress of the trackers with puzzled speculation. The dogs did not travel in a straight line. Instead, they ranged widely from side to side & cross the meadowland in an erratic half-circling progress, finally to converge at the bank of Linger Creek. Here the two teams seemed to follow a more definite trail, moving forward at greater speed and with more confidence. Noses to the ground like canine vacuum cleaners, they led their human companions along the meandering course of the stream towards where it vanished into the tangle of Devilgut.

At the large boulder embedded in the ground where Linger Creek jogged before coursing into the badlands, Wiegand and Restibo pulled in the dogs. They were reluctant to halt, tugging at the restraining leash. Wiegand waited for Gib and the sheriff to catch up. "That's the way she went," he said pointing ahead.

"How could she?" Thoreau demanded unconvinced. "The telescope we found——"

"Are you sure?" Restibo asked Wiegand. "I know the dogs want to head into Devilgut—but couldn't they have picked up some other trail? All the evidence we have indicates that she didn't come this way."

"I know what I'm talking about. I'll stake my reputation on it."

"It's more than your reputation at stake here," Thoreau snapped. "If we let those mutts lead us astray, there'll be hell to pay for everybody."

Gib had not participated in the discussion but had been examining the area closely by the light of his torch. Now he interrupted. "Take a look at this." They crowded around and stared at the circle of light on the ground.

Close beside the boulder, where the earth was normally bare, lay a bunch of yellow deerweed that still retained the vague shape of a bouquet. Though somewhat withered, they were fresh enough to have been plucked no later than

the day before. Gib murmured, "She went out to pick flowers."

They were all silent for a moment. Finally, Thoreau cleared his throat. "Well, Wiegand, I guess apologies are due to your dogs—and his intuition. Let's see where else they lead us."

Vindicated, Wiegand let the leash go slack and the bloodhounds immediately turned into the mouth of Devilgut. And, as if sensing that for the first time they were being given their head, they began to bay.

It sometimes happens that the mind and body reach a point in fatigue where, rather than welcoming sleep, they league together to fight against it. Muscles remain tense, the brain continues to churn—even though their owner consciously desires complete oblivion. So it was with Alys Hoffman now. She was normally a sound sleeper, seldom troubled by restlessness. But though she had been extremely drowsy while seated under the oak tree with Matthew Cooper, once she sought her bed sleep eluded her. The more sternly she commanded herself to let go of consciousness, the more tenaciously she clung to it.

Finally, she decided to concentrate on something outside herself, some familiar night sound whose constant repetition would hypnotize her into unawareness. The rhythmic creak of the floor boards, for instance; that would do, as if someone next door were walking up and down, up and down . . .

Alys jerked completely awake as she realized that this was exactly what the sound was. In the cabin next to her room, someone was pacing back and forth like a caged animal. Since it was normally empty, except on week-ends, Alys had forgotten that it now housed Esther Cooper.

Curiously she listened, expecting that the footsteps would cease. They did not but continued with the precise rhythm

of a metronome, up and back, up and back. Alys' concern grew and with it diminished her interest in sleep. I wonder how long she's been doing that? she thought; I wonder if I'd better see if she needs anything. She didn't like to pry, particularly since the older woman had seemed a trifle standoffish. But on the other hand . . .

She rose and groped a thin robe out of the closet and stuck her feet in her bedroom slippers. Belting the rope tightly around her waist, Alys went into the lodge kitchen. She was positive there would be no one about at this hour. She began to warm some milk off the stove.

"Midnight snacking?" said Mahdesian from the doorway.

Alys jumped. "Good heavens, what are you doing up?"

"Hoping I wouldn't be alone. Got enough there for two?"

She turned back to the stove. "If you're hungry, help yourself," she told him, indicating the refrigerator. "This is for a friend." Her tone was offhand but her cheeks were tingling and she didn't want to look at him. She had an idea that he was doing enough looking for both of them; she wished the robe were of heavier material.

"Well, we're friends too, aren't we, Alys? I've got an even better idea. Do you know where your father's bottle of whisky vanished to? If we can find it, we could have a quiet drink and a quiet talk."

Inadvertently, her eyes glanced at her own bedroom door. "I don't think so—not at this late hour. I've got something else to do."

She heard him sauntering nearer. As she stirred the milk, she pulled the lapels of the robe closer together across her chest. "What better?" he said softly. "You'd be surprised how much I've thought about you to-day—and about how much we have in common."

He was standing directly behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders. For a split-second, she had a wide-awake vision that this was the touch of Gib's strong grip—but all

the time she knew it was only the pressure of Mahdesian's soft fingers. "Please don't," she said quietly.

Ever so gently, Mahdesian's touch was again separating her lapels. Embarrassed, she shifted away slightly to test the milk with her finger. It was lukewarm. His hands stole back to her shoulders again. "You know," he said, "you're even cuter without your pants. Or I guess they're called jeans, aren't they?"

"I don't want a fuss. Let's not be childish."

"When do you stop being hashful? A big girl like you, who's going to Paris—and everything . . ." He stepped close, his body pressing against hers from behind.

She picked up the saucepan of milk and turned suddenly. Her heart was pounding but she managed to say calmly, "Sorry."

Mahdesian leaped away and stared in shock at the upper front of his trousers. They were a sopping mess of warm milk that was beginning to trickle down his legs. "My God!" he stammered finally and his mouth hung open ludicrously.

Alys got a glass from the cupboard and poured the rest of the saucepanful into it. There was enough. "I won't tell anybody if you don't," she said. "After all, you're not supposed to cry over spilt milk."

Mahdesian grinned sheepishly. "It's a deal. I lose."

Alys returned to her bedroom and locked the door behind her. She took a deep relaxing breath before she proceeded with the glass of milk out through the back of the lodge, the shortest route to Esther Cooper's attached cabin. The pacing was still going on but it ceased as she knocked lightly on the door. "Who is it?" Esther asked. When Alys identified herself, she flung open the door. Her face was white and apprehensive in the gloom. Alys realized with a feeling of pity that the other woman had not even turned on the light; she had been pacing up and down in a dark room.

"I brought you a glass of warm milk," Alys said. "I heard you walking around."

"Oh—thank you," Esther murmured. "There isn't any news, is there?"

"Not yet. You really should try to sleep, Mrs. Cooper."

"I've tried, but——" She shrugged hopelessly. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you."

"You didn't disturb me, not really. I was awake." Alys hesitated. "If there's anything else I could do . . ."

"There's nothing, thanks." Then she shook her head. "Yes, there is. Would you mind—I mean, could you come in and talk to me for a minute? I don't want to be alone any longer."

"I'd be glad to. But perhaps I could get your husband——"

"No!" Esther said sharply. Then in a gentler tone, she pleaded, "Do come in." Alys obeyed and Esther closed the door. She looked around vaguely. "There's a light here some place, I guess."

Alys switched on the lamp on the dresser, feeling it would be less harsh than the overhead bulb. Unlike herself, Esther Cooper was fully dressed and the bed showed no signs of occupancy. Alys sat down on one edge of it. "I hope you like warm milk," she said. "I didn't know what else to get."

"It was very nice of you," Esther replied, looking at the glass she held as if she had forgotten it. She sipped a little of the milk. "It's quite good. Thank you."

"You're quite welcome," Alys murmured and they were both silent.

Esther finally said, "I guess you're wondering about Matt and me. It must look rather strange to you, me in here and him somewhere else."

"I hadn't really thought about it. Anyway, it's none of my business."

"We're separated," Esther said flatly as if it were a con-

fession. "Not divorced, though I suppose that will come. It might as well. We don't have anything together any more."

"There's Janie."

"Is there?" Esther asked bitterly. "Even before this awful thing happened, that didn't seem to be enough. And now—even if I get her back—I'll never be able to forget it. He was responsible for Janie and he didn't care. He doesn't even care enough to be out looking for her now!"

"That isn't true, Mrs. Cooper. He does care."

"Then why doesn't he do something!"

Alys bit her lips. She dropped her eyes before Esther's probing gaze. The older woman said in a calmer voice, "You were going to say something, dear. What?"

"Yes, I was," Alys said uncomfortably. "But I've got no business saying it, so I'm not. I'm beginning to realize that I don't know everything in the world."

Esther smiled wanly. "You're only growing up. It takes all one's life to do merely that. Now tell me what you were about to say."

"Well—no, your husband's not out looking for Janie," Alys said, low-voiced, staring at the floor. "But neither are you. It works both ways, doesn't it? You're not out looking for her, either."

"But I can't! I don't know how."

"Well, it's that way with your husband too. He doesn't know how. Oh, he wants to go, Mrs. Cooper—I saw how they practically had to tie him up to keep him from going. But he can help more right here. Alys recalled what Cooper had said to her earlier. "It's a matter of everybody doing what he's capable of."

Esther shook her head, unconvinced. "He was to blame. He was responsible."

"Do you believe in equal rights for women? I do—I've always been pretty rabid on the subject. You know, that women should be on an equal footing with men and not be

regarded as second-class human beings, the way we used to be." She smiled wryly. "I told somebody that just last night."

"I don't see what that has to do with Matt and me."

"Maybe it hasn't. But I've found out, just in the last few hours actually, that there's another side to it." She hesitated, groping for words to express this new idea. "Equal rights on one side mean equal responsibility on the other."

"But I didn't lose Janie."

"I'm not putting it ^{over} well. I'm not even sure I know how to put it. But it just seems to me that somehow it isn't fair to put all the responsibility and all the blame on Janie's father. Oh, I wish I could learn to keep my mouth shut!"

Esther was silent for a while. Finally, she sank down on to the bed beside Alys and stared at the glass of milk she held. "I think I understand," she murmured. "What you're saying is that I should have been here, that I let Matt carry the whole burden alone and now I'm blaming him for my failure as well as his."

"Look," Alys muttered, "it was none of my business to say anything."

"No," Esther said slowly, "you're right. Not just about Janie being lost but about everything. About our marriage. I've been putting all the blame for our failure on him and not taking any myself. I wanted him to change—but it was up to me to change, too. Equal rights *and* equal responsibility. Oh, God!" She gave a single dry sob that made Alys flinch. "If I'd only seen that before. Maybe this whole thing wouldn't have happened. I'd have been here with him—with Janie—where I belonged."

"It's always easy to look back and see your mistakes. I can see a million of my own."

"If it just isn't too late!" Esther whispered. "If it just isn't too late!"

"Yes," Alys agreed fervently. For both of us, she thought. In the distance, faintly, like the wail of a banshee, they heard the bloodhounds begin to bay.

"Do you have any idea where they're taking us?" Sheriff Thoreau asked Gib. With the vindication of Gib's hunch had come a subtle shift in Thoreau's attitude towards him. No longer was he scornful of the ranger's opinions, or at least not openly. Instead, he seemed inclined to rely more and more upon Gib's advice. However, there was no accompanying sign that he liked Gib any better.

Gib was satisfied. He doubted if he and Thoreau would ever reach a point of friendship, but that hardly mattered. What mattered was finishing the job in the shortest time possible and it made a good deal more sense not to be working at cross-purposes.

He pointed out the junction of the two creeks to which the bloodhounds had led them. "Looks like they want to swing north, up Coachella. I covered the ground myself last night—but I'm no bloodhound, of course."

Over his shoulder, Wiegand commented, "Personally, I've always thought that man gave up a great deal when his original keen senses of smell and hearing diminished—and without getting much to compensate for it. You have to envy the so-called lower animals."

"But look who's on the leash," Restibo replied dryly. "I'll take reasoning power and let them have the keen smellers, thanks."

Thoreau, tramping along behind and slipping occasionally on the rough ground, merely grunted. "I don't see why a kid would want to come into this God-forsaken hole."

"It puzzles me, too," Gib admitted. "Particularly when she'd been expressly told not to."

"That's your reason right there," Restibo said. "Obvious

that you men don't have children." Restibo had two, both now teenagers.

The other two men were willing to accept Restibo's jocular answer but Gib was still perplexed. He sensed that something was abnormal but he could not grasp it firmly. People, even children—even *lost* children—seldom acted without a reason. And he still was not able to fathom why Janie Cooper, a responsible and intelligent child, would deliberately venture into Devilgut, far enough to become hopelessly lost. True, he himself had said that children did not follow the rules of adult logic. But even granting this, he still could not understand it. "What are we stopping for?"

The bloodhounds, after pushing through a thicket of mesquite, had halted on the banks of Coachella Creek, hesitating as if uncertain which direction to take. The four men crowded up for a quick consultation.

"They seem to have lost the scent," Wiegand admitted.

Gib played his flashlight beam across the stream. "It's entirely possible that she crossed the creek here. Restibo, take your team across and see if they pick up the trail. We'll explore this side."

They did as he suggested but, although they worked the two banks for a hundred yards in each direction, the dogs gave no indication that they were on the right track. Baffled, the four huddled again to exchange theories.

"She must have gone somewhere," Thoreau said, exasperated. "She couldn't have just disappeared into thin air."

"There's got to be an answer," Gib muttered. "If she came this far—and the dogs don't leave much doubt of that—then where did she go from here?" He stared at the shallow stream, frowning in concentration. "Wait a minute."

They all watched him while he wrestled with an idea. "Yes?" Restibo finally prompted.

"The old Indian trick," Gib said slowly. "Walking in the water. That way there'd be no scent for the dogs to pick up."

"But why would she do that? Nobody was chasing her."

"I don't know. It doesn't make sense. But then neither does her just vanishing." He shrugged. "Why don't we head upstream on either bank and see what we find? We know she didn't go downstream or she'd be home by now."

There was no argument. Gib and Restibo crossed to the west bank of the creek, leaving Wiegand and the sheriff to work the opposite side. Now the men were the leaders, the dogs paddling along by their sides without any apparent eagerness. And then, when they had travelled about two hundred yards upstream and were glancing at each other anxiously, wondering, their patience was finally rewarded. On the east bank, the hounds suddenly began to bay again.

"Hey!" Thoreau shouted. "Come on!"

His urging was unnecessary. At the first yelping, Gib and Restibo were already fording the sluggish stream. As they reached dry ground, their own dogs leaped forward and began to bay also. Wiegand and Thoreau were out of sight but their trail was easily followed by the excited cry of the bloodhounds. Gib and Restibo raced after them.

A moment later, they had caught up with the leaders. Wiegand's team had halted at the base of a tall sycamore tree and milled around it eagerly, growling deep in their throats.

"What do you think?" Thoreau panted. "God, the dogs nearly tore my arm off."

Gib shone his light back and forth. "Maybe this is where she slept last night. At least——" He went closer to the tree and examined the trunk. "Look at those."

On the smooth tree trunk were several parallel scratches as if the bark had been scored by the teeth of a large comb. Restibo murmured, "That looks like .

"Puma claw marks," Gib finished. "From the size and the height, I'd say they were Big Ben's claws." He swung towards Wiegand. "Is it possible that your hounds have picked up the lion's trail instead of the girl's?"

"It's possible," Wiegand admitted reluctantly. "Not before, of course. But after they lost her scent back at the creek——"

Thoreau swore. "This is what I've been afraid of since I first heard of that cat."

"What is?"

"It's plain as the nose on your face, man. The kid's trail ends and right away the dogs pick up the lion's trail. Put two and two together. The lion got the kid. That's why nobody's been able to find her."

Restibo said doubtfully, "Gib, didn't you say that Big Ben wouldn't——"

"Yeah. I still don't believe that Big Ben would attack her. Trail her out of pure nosiness, maybe, but not jump her. Mountain lions just don't do that. And while individual lions are going to vary just as much in personality as individual humans, I know Big Ben's character. He's not a man-killer."

"How can you be sure?" the sheriff demanded. "If an animal's hungry enough, who knows what he might do? Hell, men have eaten each other, when it comes down to that."

Gib frowned dubiously but the evidence was strong enough to shake his confidence. Could he be wrong? He said, "Well, there's one way to be sure—find Big Ben."

"These dogs aren't trained for lion hunting," Wiegand objected quickly. "We don't even have rifles."

"That's right," Gib said slowly. "We'll have to go back to the lodge. If we get the posse riding, they should be here by daybreak. Then we can turn the dogs loose and find out, one way or the other." He looked around and his face was grim. "Thirty-six hours gone and we're just now getting

started in the right direction. I hope Janie can wait for us."

Two miles farther into Devilgut, Fell Laughlin heard the baying of the bloodhounds, and debated whether he should turn back to join the search party. But then the far-off sound ceased and was not repeated and he decided to stay where he was. Another half-hour, he temporized, feeling again a twinge of guilt; then I'll turn back.

His pursuit of Big Ben had been necessarily slow. In his home hunting ground, the puma was easy to track because he followed regular well-defined runs—but Big Ben was far from home. His paws left few signs, and Laughlin's difficulty was compounded by the darkness. A dozen times he had been forced to double back and, on foot, examine the ground minutely before picking up the trail once more.

Yet Laughlin felt an increasing confidence that this time would be successful. Before, when Big Ben had made his sporadic forays against the sheep herds, the trail had been old and cold. Laughlin had never been as close behind the big cat as he sensed he was to-night. Less than an hour before, he had found a freshly scratched pile of earth where Big Ben had neatly covered his droppings. And, from the appearance of the trail he followed, Laughlin realized that the puma was not heading back towards his well-nigh impregnable lair beyond Faro Valley. Instead, Big Ben was prowling Devilgut, apparently in search of prey.

His horse was nervous too, skittering at shadows, and this increased Fell Laughlin's confidence. He could detect Big Ben's trail and reason at his proximity—but his horse could smell the puma. Laughlin patted his steed's neck reassuringly. "Don't worry, boy," he murmured. "This time we're hunting him." He kept his rifle ready.

Shortly afterwards, he discovered the rock den where Big Ben had holed up the night before. He explored it gingerly

on foot, momentarily expecting the light of his torch to be reflected from gleaming slit-eyes. But the den was empty. Laughlin hesitated. The rock ground gave no clues as to what direction Big Ben had gone. To guess wrong now meant losing the chase altogether.

And while he stood there, frowning irresolutely, Big Ben himself supplied the answer. Close at hand, so close that Laughlin jumped, came the puma's wild scream, an unearthly screech that seemed to make the entire forest vibrate. Laughlin's horse reared in fright.

"Steady, boy!" he commanded, holding desperately to the reins to keep the animal from breaking into panicked flight. "Steady!"

As the horse quietened, Laughlin swung to the saddle. The scream had come from not a hundred yards distant. Heart thudding in anticipation, he turned his mount in that direction. He had to spur the trembling animal hard to make him obey. Cautiously, they moved closer.

As they neared the spot whence the scream had emanated, Laughlin heard another, even more ominous, sound. From the dark underbrush came the noise of something thrashing about. Then this ceased and utter silence returned. Laughlin probed the darkness with his flashlight. Abruptly, he reined in his horse. The beam of light had found the cause of the commotion. Half-concealed in the mesquite lay the brown body of a burro, its outstretched legs still quivering although the animal was now dead. It had been the burro's broken-neck death agonies that he had heard. But of its killer there was no sign.

He can't be far, though, Laughlin thought; he wouldn't kill and run away. He looked up. Here the midnight sky was nearly obliterated by the live-oaks whose heavy branches wove together to form a leafy canopy. And among them Laughlin detected a shape, little more than a darker shadow, that was not a part of the foliage. With a thrill of sheer exultation, he shone his light upon it.

High above, crouched on a thick horizontal branch, Big Ben glared down at his enemy.

For a long moment, they just looked at each other, hunter and hunted. Then Big Ben growled deep in his throat and, rising, gathered his legs under him to leap to a parallel branch. From there a second leap would carry him into the protective darkness. At the same instant, Fell Laughlin raised his rifle and fired.

The mountain lion, struck in mid-air, came crashing to earth. Laughlin, spurring wildly forward, sent two more bullets into the tawny head. Big Ben coughed once and was silent. Laughlin, sitting triumphantly above him, watched the big cat die. The additional shots had been largely unnecessary, he realized; his first bullet would have been sufficient.

Then, as he stared down at the body of his vanquished foe, the first flush of triumph was replaced by a vague regret. Even in death, Big Ben seemed to exude a certain magnificence that defied man's humbling. It was as if he told his conqueror, I am still king of the forest and without your rifle you would have been no match for me.

"There'll never be another like you," Laughlin murmured in tribute. "I guess I'm a little sorry it had to be me that did it, after all."

He dismounted and, drawing nearer, was amazed by the puma's size. He decided he would place Big Ben's head and skin on his ranch-house wall; that way would Big Ben be remembered. Laughlin brought his horse closer and, turning the animal's head away so that the horse would not see what he intended, began to lift the dead puma up behind his saddle.

The four men had reached the lodge when they heard Big Ben's eerie scream far-off, in the direction from which they had come. But they were unable to hear the rifle shots that

followed, and so this merely gave a fresh urgency to their actions.

While Wiegand returned his hounds to the kennel truck, there to wait for the coming of daylight, the other three men busied themselves with the task of turning the search in the new direction. The entire posse had to be brought out of the Murray Forest, where they had wasted nearly twenty-four hours, and directed into Devilgut. Gib, Thoreau and Restibo huddled together at the rear of the station wagon and pored over the map.

"Too bad I let the helicopter go," the sheriff fretted. "Now's when we need it bad."

"It wouldn't have been too much help in the dark."

"They could have dropped flares or something."

"In the forest?" Gib asked, horrified. "We'd have the biggest fire since Rome. That reminds me—when you order the posse to move out, make sure they drown all their campfires."

"Well, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea," Thoreau snapped. "Clear out some of this country and people wouldn't get themselves lost so easy." He groaned in frustration. "God almighty, I was sure we'd have this thing wrapped up by now. But here it is practically Saturday."

"Your men won't mind, if we can find her."

"Who cares about the men? I'm thinking of the horses."

Gib didn't understand this remark but before he could ask for an explanation they were interrupted by the noise of trucks growling up the road from the highway. There were four of them, each packed with men, the inmates of the county Honor Ranch. Thoreau hurried away to greet them, leaving the search details to be worked out by Gib and Restibo.

"Let's get to work," Restibo said with obvious relief as his superior departed. "How's the best way to handle it, Gib?"

"Ordinarily, I'd say have the posse come back the way they went, through Miner's Gap. That's the easiest way for men who don't know the ground. But it's a question of time. That means they should swing up over the north slope of Breadloaf. That'll bring them in on the far side of Devilgut, along Silent Ridge." Gib grimaced. "God, I wish I was out there to lead them."

"But you're not. What should I tell them?"

"Their route is practically due east until they cross Breadloaf, then they swing south. There's a fire-tower up on White Peak that is right on the route. The posse can take a bearing on that."

Restibo scribbled a quick note. "Got it. Anything else?"

"Watch out for rock-slides—and don't forget to tell them about the fires." Gib turned back. "Oh, and you might as well break the news about Big Ben. Tell them there's a bounty on him, in case anybody's interested."

"Rock-slides. Watch fires. Big Ben," Restibo repeated. He slid into the front seat of the station wagon and picked up the microphone. "Sheriff's command post to Red and Blue leaders. Repeat . . ."

Gib didn't wait to listen but strode away towards the lodge. The trucks had disgorged their passengers and they stood around the lodge steps, smoking and talking in low voices. A few were indulging in horseplay with the flashlights they had been issued, along with individual food packs. The sheriff was consulting on the porch with their "foreman", a husky man in khaki.

"I don't think you need worry," he was telling Thoreau as Gib joined them. "These men are volunteers."

"They're prisoners," Thoreau disagreed. "And as such they have to be watched."

"We just don't have the personnel that it would require, practically a man-to-man basis on a job like this. There's five of us, which is as high a ratio as we ever have." The

foreman shrugged. "Of course, if that isn't satisfactory to you, I'll pack them back in the trucks and take them home."

"Well, since they're already here we might as well use them. But I don't mind saying that this boy scout honour system sounds like a bunch of crap to me."

"It does to a lot of people," the foreman agreed mildly. "But the funny part is that it works, better than ninety per cent of the time. That's more than Alcatraz can say."

Thoreau turned away, leaving Gib more or less alone with the foreman. Gib said, "I see you've given your men flashlights. Does that mean you plan on starting out before day-break?"

"We're just waiting orders."

Since Thoreau apparently hadn't given up, Gib decided to assume the responsibility. "I think the best thing is for you to take your men up through Portal Canyon to the meadow. I'll send along a deputy who knows the way. You can camp there, get a little sleep, and be ready to hit Devil-gut just as soon as it's light. By the way, I don't suppose any of the prisoners are armed?"

The foreman grinned. "We're optimists—but not suckers."

"Well, since you'll all be on foot there isn't much chance of your running into Big Ben. But pass the word to keep an eye out for a big mountain lion or his tracks. There's a faint chance it might have something to do with the girl's disappearance."

"I'll tell them in the morning, when it's not so dark. Most of them are city boys and no use making them nervous."

Gib wished him luck and, going into the lodge, found the stand-by deputy sleeping on a pair of tables pushed together. He woke him and gave him the proper instructions, and then crossed the parking lot to his ranger station, a two-room frame cottage finished in half-logs. Gib sighed as he saw his bed still unmade from Thursday morning. He turned to

his short-wave transmitter and, one by one, roused his fire-towers, a quick check-out to make sure their equipment was functioning properly. There was no time for chatting, and it gave him a lonely feeling to be momentarily in touch with his own routine.

When he stepped outside, the Honour Ranch inmates were already nearly out of sight up Portal Canyon. He was able to glimpse only the bobbing glow of their flashlights, reminding him of a swarm of fireflies. He ticked off the list in his mind. Posse notified—prisoners dispatched—fire-towers checked—bloodhounds ready—fresh horses coming . . . Maps, he remembered suddenly; we'll need more maps. This reminded him of Alys and he thought, why, it's Saturday. This is the day she leaves; this is the day I lose her. For me, there are really two girls lost—Janie and Alys—and I wonder if I have a chance of ever finding either one. The forest stands between them, and me, one way or another—and Gib staring bleakly out across the wilderness, his wilderness, for the first time in his life nearly hating what he saw.

"It's three o'clock," he muttered in his own defence. "Low ebb" Wearily, he tramped away to go on with his job.

"I don't intend to have my dogs chewed up," Wiegand declared. "And that's that. Come daylight, when we can see what we're up against, okay. But not till then."

"I could order you to," Thoreau said crossly. "I'm the sheriff, after all."

"You could try," Wiegand contradicted him. "But my hounds don't go without me—and I don't intend to go without a court order that says I have to."

Thoreau glanced around at Restibo for support but his deputy shook his head unhappily. "I guess we can't make him, sheriff." The argument centred on the pursuit of Big Ben. The details of swinging the posse in another direction

had been cleared away with a minimum of confusion, leaving the men at the lodge with little to do in the few remaining hours before daybreak. Thoreau had decided—rightly, Restibo thought—to return to the trail of the big cat, but armed and on horseback this time. However, he had run smack into Wiegand's unwavering opposition. Concern for his dogs was the paramount idea in the little kennel-master's mind and, indeed, in his entire life.

"After all," Wiegand pointed out, "I was hired to track a little girl, not any mountain lion. I'm willing to do what I was hired to do—right this minute, if you say so. You're the one who wants to change the rules."

"But we've got to find the puma first," Thoreau fumed. "It all goes together."

"That's just a guess. That being the case, I intend to wait till the morning. Do you realize what that cat might do to my dogs in the dark?"

The argument might have continued indefinitely, or until Thoreau reached the point of apoplexy, but it was taken out of their hands and settled once and for all by the arrival of Fell Laughlin. They were apprised of this event by the dogs themselves, who began to bark fiercely, and then by Gib Scott, who came running around the lodge to summon them.

"Come on quick," he called. "Laughlin's back—and he's got Big Ben with him!"

Laughlin was just dismounting by the lodge steps as they joined him, the dead puma hanging limply across his horse's croup. But he seemed oddly disinclined to accept their elated congratulations, almost as if he were ashamed of what he had done. "Yeah, I got him," he replied heavily. "It's Big Ben, all right. Ran across his trail in Devilgut. I know I shouldn't have—"

"Boy, ain't he a whopper!" Thoreau exclaimed, holding up the animal's head. "I don't think I ever saw one so big."

"We were just getting ready to go out after him," Gib told Laughlin. "You saved us a lot of time and trouble, Fell."

"I did?" Laughlin said, surprised. "You mean that?"

Gib explained and Laughlin shook his head in relief. "That makes me feel a lot better. All the way back I've been kicking myself for taking off on a lion hunt when I should have been . . . But I guess maybe something was pushing me in the right direction, after all."

His relief was not shared by Matthew Cooper. He had been half-dozing under the oak tree until the commotion of Laughlin's arrival had aroused him. The implications of what he heard made his voice shake. "You don't really think that Janke—" He stopped, unable to put the cruel possibility into words.

"No, I don't," Gib said kindly, "but we've got to be sure. Now that we have Big Ben we can be sure."

"God!" muttered Cooper between his teeth. He stared at the dead puma in horror.

"We got to get the carcass to the lab," Thoreau said in a low voice. "They can tell us in a minute what we want to know, soon as they can look at its guts. Trouble is that it's an hour-and-a-half, two-hour drive."

Restibo said, "It's only thirty-five minutes to Imperial. That's over in the next county, but they'd probably co-operate."

"Get on the phone and make sure," Thoreau suggested. To Laughlin he said: "I'm going to have to impound your lion, mister."

Laughlin nodded regretfully. "I guess it serves me right. I would have liked the pelt, though."

"You may get it," Gib said. "Somebody's got to drive the carcass over to Imperial—and I sent our spare man up to Chinese Flat with the prisoners. Of course if you're too tired . . ."

"It's my job," Laughlin said. "Might as well finish it."

Restibo came back from telephoning. "The lab at Imperial will be set up and ready to roll when we get there. I told them to radio us the results on our frequency."

"Thirty-five minutes," Thoreau said. "We'll be waiting."

"I'll be there in twenty-five," Laughlin promised.

"Good." Thoreau smiled grimly. "And if you get a ticket, I'll fix it for you."

At the mouth of Devilgut, the foreman of the Honour Ranch halted his men, there to wait for daylight before commencing their search operations. Shortly afterwards, as the prisoners found resting spots amid the soft meadow grass, roll-call was held. It went without incident until the M's were reached.

"Lewis . . ."

"Here!"

"Maberry . . ."

"Yo!"

"McCurdy . . ."

There was no answer.

"McCurdy . . . ?"

After Alys had finally gone back to her own room, Esther Cooper tried lying on the bed, hoping that sleep would release her from the prison of her fears. But her thoughts continued to writhe like snakes in her mind, coiling in upon themselves and never reaching an end. Outside, the night was troubled also. She could hear, without comprehending the cause, the furor that attended the various comings and goings at the lodge. And, at each new outburst of excitement, she lay tense, wondering. At last, she could stand it no longer. She rose and dressed and slipped outside into the darkness.

She wandered aimlessly around the outside of the lodge

building, no particular destination in mind. In their kennel truck, the bloodhounds growled uneasily as she passed. At the radio transmitter car in the parking lot, she detected the figures of several men—one of them she recognized as the sheriff—standing tensely, as if waiting for something. They did not notice her and Esther did not approach them.

A horse was drowsing by the porch railing of the lodge, standing on three legs, one hoof slightly raised. Esther stood looking at the steed for a while, a wild notion half-formed in her mind. What would happen if she should take the horse and . . .

"Esther." The voice calling her name broke into her thoughts so unexpectedly that she jumped. She looked around. "Esther—over here." And then, across the road, she detected the shadowy figure of her husband, seated beneath the large oak tree.

Esther hesitated, half-eager, half-reluctant. Her desire prevailed and slowly she crossed the pavement towards him. "What are you doing here, Matt?"

"Just sitting." He indicated a spot on the ground beside him. "Plenty of room."

She accepted his invitation yet maintained a little distance between them. "Couldn't you sleep?"

"No."

"I couldn't, either." After a moment, she asked, "Has anything happened?"

Cooper said dully, "The bloodhounds have picked up her trail. The only trouble is that it's in the opposite direction than we thought she went. It means starting all over."

"But it can be done, can't it? That doesn't mean there isn't any chance, does it?"

"There's still a chance," he said but Esther thought his tone sounded evasive. "It's just that it's never easy, starting over."

"We can't give up hope, Matt."

"No." He fumbled for something in the darkness beside

him. "Would you care for a drink, Esther? I have a bottle here some place."

"I don't think so. But I would like a cigarette if you have one."

He gave her his pack, nearly empty, and joined her in lighting the cigarettes. She murmured her thanks and said, "It tastes good. I guess I needed one—but I do so hate to smoke alone."

"I didn't know that."

"No," she admitted. "I guess I never told you. But it's true."

"We never did talk much, at least about little things. Maybe if. . ." He fell silent.

After a while, Esther said, "It's very peaceful here. It was so close in the room. I wish I'd known you were out here, Matt."

"I suppose I should have told you."

"I didn't give you much reason for wanting to." She turned her head to look at him. "I want you to know that I'm sorry—for everything."

"You shouldn't be, Esther. You were right."

"No," she said with soft positiveness. "I've had a chance to do a lot of thinking the past few hours. A lot of re-evaluation, Matt. I discovered some things about myself—about us, actually,—that I never really saw before. That girl—Alys—"

"What's she been telling you?" Cooper interrupted, almost harshly,

"Nothing I shouldn't have been able to figure out myself." Esther took a deep breath. "Matt, I haven't been very smart."

"You're tired—and upset."

"That's just now. It doesn't excuse the past, what's happened to you and me."

Cooper muttered, "That was as much my fault as yours, Esther. You know that."

"Yes, Matt. I do know that. But I think you tried to do something about it, while I didn't. That's what I mean, that I wasn't very smart. I wasn't even smart enough to know what I had and how much it meant to me. I guess it's only when you've lost it——"

"We'll get Janie back," he said roughly. "Don't talk as if there's no hope."

"Janie's only part of it. That's what I didn't realize before. I guess it's taken the shock of, well, maybe losing her to show me how much I've already lost."

He said slowly, "You know what you're saying is exactly what I've been thinking myself. Just like it used to be—do you remember, Esther?—a long time ago, when we always seemed to have the same ideas."

"I know," she murmured, turning to face him in the gloom, her eyes seeking his. "What happened to us, Matt?"

"I don't know. A lot of things—little things that I can't even seem to remember now." His hand groped out for hers. "Esther . . ."

Their fingers found each other, clung together. "Matt," she whispered and the last vestige of the wall between them dissolved with her tears. "Oh, Matt, come back to me! Don't let me lose you, too!"

He pulled her against him, cradling her awkwardly after so long a time. "I'm here," he assured her in a shaky voice. "Don't cry, sweetheart. I haven't seen you cry in years."

"That's the trouble," she whimpered, holding tightly to him. "I should have cried a long time ago—then I wouldn't have to cry now. Don't you understand?"

"Not really. Not yet. Sweetheart, please forgive me——"

"Don't talk," she hushed him. "Just hold me, that's enough. We'll pray for Janie together."

They lay quietly for a long time under the oak tree while he gently stroked her back. At last, she murmured, "Isn't it strange? Nothing's really changed, except that we're to-

gether, and yet I feel better about everything—about Janie. It's almost as if I know now that she'll be all right." When he didn't respond, she craned her head to look up at him. "Matt, you have told me everything, haven't you? There isn't anything you're holding back?"

"No," he said and yet she wondered if his tone was guarded. "I'm just fagged out, that's all."

She sat up, although he continued to hold on to her. She hesitated. "Matt—why don't you come to my room and lie down? There's a bed—you could get a little rest."

"Where will you be?"

"I'll be with you. From now on."

"Come on," he said. Holding hands, they walked away together.

For Alys Hoffman, sleep had finally come, but it was not accompanied by rest. Her conscious mind had surrendered to the demands of fatigue, yet her subconscious continued to toil. She dreamed.

Part of the time, her dreams were pleasant, fantasies that were only slightly distorted. It seemed to her that she and Gib were married and they had a daughter who resembled Janie Cooper, and they were all extremely happy together in some vague setting she only partially recognized.

But, although this was comforting, Alys was annoyed by the intermittent squawk of a metallic voice that seemed to drag her into something shadowy and terrifying, against which she fought. What made it even more frightening was that the voice was garbled, with only an occasional word or two that she could understand.

"... reports prisoner missing ..."

It seemed as if the voice were talking about her, and Alys' dream gradually merged into a nightmare in which she was held captive in a small cage whose bars resisted her efforts to free herself. And the voice said something about a lion,

but that didn't seem right because she was the one in the cage, and she called out to Gib to save her. But he did not come, only the voice again, making her cringe.

" . . . stand by for lab report . . . "

Abruptly, the nightmare shifted and she was no longer in the cell but alone at a carnival, in a tremendous mad-house that seemed to be both city and wilderness, and she was looking for somebody. " . . . little girl . . . " the metallic voice prompted and Alys knew then that it was her daughter, hers and Gib's, who was lost, and she began to run wildly through the maze, opening doors everywhere and finding no one. Help me, Gib! " she implored.

" . . . lion's stomach . . . "

She was being stalked. She was the one who was lost and Gib couldn't find her. Something was after her, it was drawing closer and closer. Now she didn't seem able to move, except in slow motion, while the inexorable voice grew louder and louder, dinning in her ears.

" . . . definitely contains human remains . . . "

Alys screamed. And then her subconscious took abrupt mercy upon her and she fainted away into a sounder sleep, and dreamed no more.

" Turn that damn radio down before you wake up the whole county," Gib ordered, and Restibo, in the front seat of the station wagon, complied.

From the speaker in the dashboard, the voice of the lab technician continued at a reduced volume. " . . . no doubt about it. Human body hair. You know the fur balls of undigested hair that collect in a cat's stomach? Well, these hairs are on the outside of a mass, which means recent. Yet there's no trace of human flesh. It's evidently been wholly digested and voided. I'd guess the human element entered the animal's digestive tract a little over twenty-four hours ago."

" Twenty-four hours," Thoreau muttered. " The time fits."

Restibo said into the microphone, "Can you tell from the hair anything more about the victim—age, sex, that sort of thing—or is it too much to ask?"

"I was coming to that." The lab man's metallic voice held a note of reproach. "We can tell you just about anything you want to know, even to what kind of pants he was wearing."

"He?" said Gib eagerly, seizing on the key word. "Then it wasn't Janie!"

Restibo held up a silencing hand and the three men leaned closer to the loudspeaker. The lab technician, unnamed and unknown, continued in his faintly professorial manner, "... definitely male. From the texture, I'd say a man in his late fifties or early sixties. Does that fit what you already know?"

"We're not sure," Restibo said cautiously. "Anything else?"

"How much do you fellows want—his social security number? Oh, yes—his clothing. He was probably wearing levis, denim. At least, we found a Levi Company button in the puma's stomach, along with a mass of fibres, that look like dark blue denim. I haven't had time to test them definitely yet, but——"

"That's won't be necessary," Restibo told him. "We know enough already. Thanks a lot for all the help. Maybe we can do as much for you some day."

"Okay," replied the radio voice. "Pleasant dreams."

Restibo replaced the microphone on its hook and the three men looked at each other in the gloom. "Well, now we know. Big Ben didn't get the girl."

"He did get somebody," Thoreau said.

Gib said, "It has to be Old Man Ritchie. Nobody else it could be. The right age, the levis—and Ritchie has been missing since yesterday some time."

Thoreau massaged his forehead as if it ached. "What a mess! The search has gone wrong, the rodeo is shot, one of

the prisoners has already gone over the hill—and now we got somebody eaten by a lion. What next?"

"Well, there's the other side too," Gib reminded him. "At least, we're on the right track at last."

Thoreau merely shook his head wearily, refusing to find cheer in the knowledge. Restibo said sympathetically, "Chief, you look like you're ready to drop. Why don't you grab yourself a couple of hours sleep before dawn? You'll feel a lot better."

"I'm all right," Thoreau said crossly.

"I think you should," Gib said. "To-morrow looks like a long day and you'll need to be fresh."

Thoreau hesitated, glancing longingly at the rear of the station wagon where the inflated mattress was spread. "Okay—but call me if anything comes up."

Gib and Restibo left him clambering into the station wagon. They walked around to the front of the lodge, neither speaking, their footsteps crunching loudly on the gravel in the early morning hush. Laughlin's horse, dozing at the porch railing, was the only other living creature they could see. Restibo finally spoke, putting into words what was in both their minds. "Big Ben made a clean sweep—first Ritchie and then his burro. Good thing Laughlin got him when he did. No telling what he might have done next."

"I don't figure it," Gib mused. "The burro, sure, that was Big Ben's dish. But he wasn't a man-killer. I just can't imagine him attacking Ritchie—particularly Ritchie, a wily old coot if ever there was one."

"Big Ben was getting old, too."

"If Big Ben wanted to hunt human beings, he didn't have to come over here to do it. There was Nemich-cha, right in his own backyard. She's been there for years and Big Ben's never bothered her." Restibo raised inquiring eyebrows and Gib explained, "She's an old Indian woman who lives in a cave over on Silver Peak. She really belongs on the reserva-

tion in the desert, but she was born on the Peak and wants to die there. Harmless enough, so nobody objects. Her people bring her in supplies every so often. She must be ninety years old, at least."

"How long since you've seen her?"

"Three, four months. I took a swing over that way the first part of the summer. Why?"

"Then you don't know for sure that Big Ben didn't gobble her up first. Maybe he got a taste for human flesh and came over into Devilgut for some more."

"I don't know for sure," Gib agreed stubbornly. "But I still don't believe it. My guess is that Old Man Ritchie had a stroke or died of some other natural cause and Big Ben happened to come across his body. Puma's don't pass up a handy meal—and none of the big meat-eaters object to carrion." He snapped his fingers thoughtfully, considering. "Mentioning Hemich-cha brings up something else, though. I hadn't considered her before because the search was pointed in the opposite direction. But now Janie seems to have headed towards the general neighbourhood of Silver Peak. It might be a good idea to send the helicopter over there first thing in the morning and pay Hemich-cha a visit."

"You think she might have seen something?"

"Not much chance of that. She's nearly blind."

"Then what do you mean, Gib?"

"I don't exactly know. It's just that—Restibo, did you ever get a funny feeling that there was something screwy going on that you couldn't quite pin down? You know, when two and two don't add up to four?"

"You're talking to a law^d man," Restibo reminded him. "We call it the cop^d instinct."

"That's how I feel about this. On the face of it, it's a simple case of a child being lost. But is it that simple? Think about it. We find Janie's toy telescope well into Miner's Gap, but she didn't really go that way at all. So

how did it get there? She goes into Devilgut, the one place she was ordered to leave alone, and not only that, she keeps going, even walking in water to keep from being followed—almost as if she were running away from something. And then there's Old Man Ritchie. Was it just a coincidence that he disappeared at exactly the same time Janie Cooper disappeared?" Gib shook his head. "I don't know. What do you do when you don't like the answer you get, anyway?"

"You keep pushing until you come up with an answer you do like."

Gib looked at the sky. "An hour-and-a-half or so till dawn. You game to try a long shot?"

"I'm a hunch-player, too."

"Then wake up Wiegand. We're going to need his dogs again."

The horse lost his footing momentarily on the uneven ground of Faro Valley and Calvin Lowry came awake with a start. He hadn't been aware of falling asleep, but now he realized that some time ago—how long? a minute? an hour?—he had dozed off in the saddle. He looked around foggily, seeing only the black shapes of trees and mesquite. It was still night. He couldn't have slept very long, probably only a few seconds actually and it had been so very pleasant to . . .

His eyes had drifted shut again. With a shudder, Lowry forced them open. Fatigue, which he had confidently scorned a few hours before, was presenting its overdue bill at last. Every muscle in his body protested against the long ordeal. His neck ached merely with the effort of holding his head erect. His eyes burned from peering into the darkness and his fingers cramped from holding on to the chamber of his rifle.

I can't stop now, Lowry told them all, I've got to keep going. I've got to find her. He fastened on this thought

like a beacon to steer by. I've got to find her, I've got to find her . . .

He was startled by a new sound in the forest and, dully, he squinted around, attempting to locate its source. It took him a long time to realize that the noise emanated from himself, and that he was sobbing with exhaustion.

They left the horses at the mouth of Devilgut and proceeded on foot upstream, turning north on Coachella Creek until they came at last to the big sycamore where the hounds had picked up Big Ben's spoor. After Gib's first explanations, they spoke hardly at all, the three men following the bloodhounds in sombre silence. The trail, they knew, might end in a gruesome discovery.

"Which way now?" Wiegand asked, when they halted under the sycamore.

"Ritchie's camp was up on Breadloaf," Gib said, pointing north. "Let's try that way first."

The bloodhounds, given their head, were eager to comply, having no way of knowing that their quarry no longer existed. They crossed the creek, baying occasionally, and turned downstream again—only to halt in obvious confusion at the base of a tall live oak. No amount of urging could make them proceed farther.

"We're stymied," Wiegand admitted finally. "Apparently, the cat took to the trees here. Only thing we can do is to keep circling until the hounds pick up the scent again where he came down."

Restibo murmured, "It'll be light in another half-hour. What do you think, Gib?"

Gib considered, frowning. He had brought the hounds back to Big Ben's trail in the hope of locating Ritchie's body. He was not motivated by any humanitarian instincts, since it was already far too late to do anything for the old prospector except bury what remained. Instead, he was playing his

hunch—that somehow the two disappearances were linked—and that finding Ritchie might provide answers that were now missing. He had no idea what those answers might be. And since it was only the slimmest kind of hunch at best, time was a factor. They could not turn aside from their main concern—finding the lost child—to pursue a phantom.

“It’ll take too long that way,” he decided aloud. “But we can back-track and pick up Big Ben’s trail in the other direction.”

They retraced their steps to the original starting-point, the sycamore. The dogs didn’t seem to care which end of the trail they followed. They started off across Devilgut to the south. The puma had evidently travelled in a nearly straight line and the dogs followed the scent easily and would have rapidly out-distanced their human companions, had they been allowed to. Gib, Restibo and Wiegand trotted along behind, saying little except to curse the rough footing occasionally. They all fell more than once, skinning hands and knees, but doing no serious injury to themselves.

“I sure hope this amounts to something,” Restibo groaned as he picked himself up for perhaps the fifth time. “I’m getting too old for this sort of life.”

Nevertheless, he kept up with the other two men until they came at last to where the sawtooth of Black Ridge upthrust its serrated shape against the rapidly lightening sky. The dogs were already commencing to clamber up the steep slope, restrained only by their leashes. The men paused to catch their breath and held a brief conference.

“This trail may go for miles, all the way back to Silver Peak, without us turning up anything,” Gib said reluctantly. “Time’s running out on us.”

Restibo glanced at Wiegand, then shrugged. “Personally, I hate to run this far and have nothing to show for it.”

“Okay, then. We’ll hit the top of Black Ridge and if nothing much develops we’ll call the whole thing off and head back for the lodge. The only thing that encourages

me is that Old Man Ritchie once did a little prospecting on the ridge." Gib summoned up a tired grin. "Come to think of it, though, he told me that there wasn't anything worthwhile up there."

'They loosed the dogs, since the steep incline made it impossible for the men to climb while holding the animals. The hounds, freed of restraint, floundered eagerly upwards, leaving the men to toil slowly up the difficult cliff by themselves. They disappeared over the summit and began to bay once more.

"You may have to chase them into the next county," Gib told Wiegand ruefully.

"They'll come back when I call," Wiegand replied with serene confidence. "These are trained hounds, don't forget."

They reached the summit, panting and drenched in sweat. But before they could look around to ascertain where the bloodhounds had gone, the animals themselves supplied the answer. From a short distance off, they began to bark, a yelping cry that differed from the mournful baying Gib and Restibo had become accustomed to.

Wiegand understood. "They've found something."

Anticipation replaced fatigue and they hurried in the direction of the barking, weaving their way among the tangle of rocks and sagebrush that made up the crest of the ridge. The hounds set up a renewed clamour as they drew near, milling excitedly around a large boulder. Wiegand called them off and began replacing the leashes.

"I don't see anything, do you?" Restibo asked in a near whisper.

Gib, passing the beam of his flashlight slowly among the rocks, suddenly halted as the light found a target. "Look over here." The rays of the torch glowed dully on something worn and brown. It was a hiking boot.

Almost reluctantly, they went closer to the boulder. Their faces tightened as they looked at the welter of earth, stained

brown, and shreds of blue denim and white fragments of well-licked bone. There were other fragments, and Restibo made a gulping sound as if he were going to be sick. Gib felt the same way. Even to one used to violent death in many forms, it was hard to view these human remains with equanimity. Big Ben had not been a tidy diner.

Gib said, "This boulder used to be balanced on the other one. Looks like most of him's underneath it, from the waist up, anyway."

In silence, the three men strained to roll the huge stone aside. Gib knelt and scooped dirt away.

"Is it Ritchie?" Restibo managed.

"Yeah. But I was right. Big Ben didn't kill him. He was already dead."

"He must have been digging here, getting out some rock samples, and the big one fell on top of him. Covered everything but his legs and hips." Restibo made an instinctive sign of the cross. "I hope he never knew what hit him."

"He didn't," Gib said slowly. "But it wasn't the rock that killed him, either. This dirt wasn't spread over him by the rock. Somebody rolled it on top of Ritchie—later on."

"Somebody?" echoed Restibo.

Gib brushed at the back of the old shirt. Between the shoulder blades was a wound that Big Ben could never have made. "Ever see one of these before?" The hole was black with earth and crusted blood—and perfectly round.

"Bullet hole," Restibo said softly, and Wiegand crowded against his shoulder to see. "He was shot in the back."

"Yeah," Gib agreed. He rose and they stood staring at each other as the first rays of the sun began to redden the eastern horizon. "I guess we got some kind of an answer, after all. It's murder."

SATURDAY

AT Camp Japutal, twelve miles to the west of Hannah Crossing, the telephone began to ring early. The head Girl Scout counsellor—whose camping name, assumed for the summer, was Starlight—went sleepily to answer it. She knew in advance what it portended. The phone had scarcely stopped ringing since yesterday morning and each call had been the same.

"No. Mrs. Anderson—your daughter is fine and there's nothing to worry about. None of our girls here is lost. Your daughter will be coming back on the bus to-day just as scheduled. That's quite all right, I understand your concern . . ."

Thank goodness to-day's the last day, Starlight thought as she hung up; I couldn't stand another twenty-four hours of worried mothers' checking on their little darlings. Why in the world don't they find that Cooper child, anyway? . . .

The question, which must have been repeated in one form or another over morning newspapers in several thousand homes, would have been resented for its implied criticism by those engaged in the search for Janie Cooper—had they been present to hear it. Their resentment would have been justified. In the thirty-six hours that the child had been missing, the search had gradually expanded until it now covered one hundred square miles of harsh wilderness, the area of a fair-sized city with none of a city's con-

veniences. Nor was there any indication that this would be the end of it. The search went on.

The sheriff's mounted posse, a night's hard ride behind them, reached the northern fringes of Devilgut at dawn. They paused there to gobble a cold breakfast before splitting up again into two-man teams, and to allow their leaders to report via back-pack radio to the sheriff.

The crackling radio woke Sheriff Thoreau out of a sound sleep. He listened foggily to the leaders and then instructed them to use their own judgment. He peered around for either Restibo or Gib Scott. Not seeing them, Thoreau lay down again, deciding he would rest just a minute more before getting up, and fell back to sleep instantly.

Others at Hannah Crossing slept also. Alys Hoffman slumbered quietly in her dark bedroom. In the cabin next door, Matthew and Esther Cooper dozed, holding each other tightly even in sleep. In the lodge dining-room, the newsmen had put several tables together to form a community bed, and down the road the ambulance drivers had put the stretchers to use beneath a cypress tree.

But not all slumbered. Atop Black Ridge, Gib and Restibo and Wiegand had begun the grisly job of removing the body of the murdered prospector. In the kitchen of Al's Place, its proprietor was getting ready his breakfast menu. And at the eastern end of Chinese Flat, the foreman of the Honou Ranch addressed his charges grimly.

"What happened last night doesn't change anything," he told them. "We're one man short but we'll proceed as planned. Any questions?"

"What about McCurdy?" someone ventured.

"Our job is to find the little girl. Don't worry about McCurdy." The foreman smiled thinly. "He's going to get a search all his own. Now let's go."

And, at approximately this same moment, the Coast Guard helicopter arrived over Hannah Crossing, arousing those

who still slept. The second full day of the search was beginning.

Like many of those who sought her, Janie Cooper had spent a troubled night. She had reached a point in fatigue where she was too tired to sleep easily, particularly among strange surroundings. Hemich-cha had fixed her a bed—if the collection of rags and weeds could really be called a bed—but it was small protection against the hard rock floor of the cave. No matter how Janie turned and twisted she could not achieve anything approaching comfort. It was cold on the mountain top, too. On the previous night the choppy canyons of Devilgut had shielded her from the wind, but it blew unimpeded across the face of Silver Peak, making Janie shiver.

Her own stomach was no ally either. The toyon berries and later the cakes Hemich-cha had baked from the mesquite flour—which, though unappetizing in appearance, were sweet-tasting—had not agreed with Janie. Her digestive system, already upset from the bout with the spring water, complained incessantly at this unfamiliar diet. Finally she was forced to creep out of the cave and vomit.

So it was with lacklustre interest that Janie saw Saturday dawn over the Encantos. Yesterday she had been able to bolster herself with the thought that rescue was just over the next hill and that—despite being lost, despite the Professor, despite everything—she would soon be safe. This morning, tired and sick, she no longer could believe it. She wondered morbidly if she were going to die.

Hemich-cha understood her mood, despite their inability to communicate in words, and hovered sympathetically around the little girl, offering her what was apparently the choicest tit-bite from her meagre larder. However, Janie could eat only a handful of the dried corn and acorn meats before her stomach rebelled again.

I've got to get out of here, she thought desperately. Much as she did not want to leave the old Indian woman who, after all, was another human being, still Janie realized that it was her only hope. She couldn't just wait for ever on the mountain, getting sicker and sicker. She had to keep moving. But in what direction lay home?

She tried to make Hemich-cha understand her predicament and her needs. It was a frustrating task, that left Janie more tired than before. But at last she thought she had been successful, for Hemich-cha led her out of the cave to what seemed to be the beginnings of a trail. There she stood, pointing alternately down the path and then to herself. Since it was not the trail that led to the spring but slanted off along the mountainside in another direction, Janie decided that this was the way Hemich-cha thought she should go.

"Home?" she asked, trying to make certain. "My home?" She tried pantomiming other human beings and houses. Hemich-cha began to nod and Janie felt relieved. She did not comprehend that the trail the old Indian woman pointed out was the one used by her kinsmen on their infrequent visits. Far from leading towards civilization, it wound off in the opposite direction, towards the desert.

Since Janie did not know this, she was eager to go. Yet with the moment of departure upon her, she hesitated. "Thanks a lot," she told the woman, hoping that her tone would convey the gratitude she felt. She added primly, as she had been taught, "I've enjoyed myself very much."

Hemich-cha shook her head vigorously, as if she wished Janie to remain a moment longer. She hobbled away towards the cave, as rapidly as she was able. Janie waited, wondering. But when Hemich-cha returned, the reason was plain. She carried a little woven bag which she pressed into Janie's hands, making eating motions as she did so. Fingering the bag, Janie understood. It was food for her journey, the last of Hemich-cha's small hoard.

"Gee," she murmured awkwardly, touched by Hemich-cha's generosity. "Thank you very much." She would have liked to kiss Hemich-cha good-bye but the idea embarrassed her and she was afraid the old woman might not like it. Indians were supposed to be pretty unemotional, Janie remembered. So she settled for shaking Hemich-cha's withered hand instead. "Good-bye."

Hemich-cha didn't reply. Janie started off down the path. At the first bend, she looked back. Hemich-cha was still standing where she had left her but Janie had passed out of her range of vision and she did not acknowledge Janie's wave of farewell. Janie continued on down the mountain-side, feeling more lonely than she had expected. Once more the wilderness closed in on all sides of her and she was alone. Maybe she had made a mistake, maybe she should go back . . .

She clutched tightly to the woven bag of food that Hemich-cha had given her, making it her talisman. Then she remembered that she hadn't even bothered to look inside, expecting it to be dried corn or something similar. She investigated now and was surprised to discover the bag contained pinyon nuts, which her father had told her were considered a great delicacy by the Indians. And Hemich-cha had given them to her, probably all she had.

Hemich-cha had given even more. Nestled among the nuts was her prized possession, the plug of chewing tobacco.

"Gosh," Janie said aloud. "and I didn't give her anything. She felt guilty at the realization. The old woman had taken her in, fed her and housed her and sent her on her way with the choicest items of her larder—and all Janie had done in return was shake her hand. She must think I'm pretty ungrateful, Janie thought with a flush of shame. Well, it isn't too late. There must be some present I could give her that she'd like. At least, I could give her back the tobacco."

Resolutely, Janie turned back up the path the way she had come.

Alys dressed slowly. The memory of her nightmare lingered, undisputed by the morning sunshine. And though she did not believe that dreams had any real significance, she was filled with a sense of foreboding that made her reluctant to approach the new day. She realized with a start that this was Saturday, the date of her departure to which she had looked forward so eagerly as the beginning of her new life. Now it was here. But where was the exhilaration, the sense of freedom she had expected? Instead, all she felt was an emptiness as if, instead of finding something new, she had lost something. Again she was reminded of her nightmare, the terrifying half-real sensation of seeking without success. What is it you really want? Alys asked herself sternly. Two days before she would have been able to answer the question confidently. Now she hesitated, and remembered what Matthew Cooper had said. It isn't where you are but what you are that matters . . .

Her suitcase, nearly packed for a week, lay open beside the cupboard door. Alys stared at it, thinking that its parted jaws looked like a trap ready to snap shut. She shook her head, confused. And then, abruptly not wishing to be alone with her thoughts any longer, she left her bedroom and entered the lodge kitchen.

She came in upon the end of an argument, or at least a discussion. Her father faced Mahdesian across the lunch counter. Hoffman's face was flushed but he held his voice under control. "Read the sign yourself," he was telling the reporter. "I have the right to refuse service to anyone."

"Dad, what's the matter?" Alys inquired. She was used to her father's choleric outbursts and they did not bother her, but this time something was different. His expression which he was attempting to make scornfully aloof, contained

more than anger, almost as if he were holding back tears. "What's happened?"

"I just ordered breakfast," Mahdesian answered, looking wryly amused.

"And I just refused to serve him," Hoffman concluded. "I don't want his kind around here, that's all."

"But why?" Alys pressed nervously. Surely Mahdesian had not been publicizing his pass at her in the kitchen last night! Seeking a clue, her gaze fell on the newspaper that lay on the counter, folded to an inside page. It had apparently been delivered by the supply truck. She blinked in surprise. Smirking up at her was a one-column cut of her father. The tie-in story beside it was headlined **ILL WIND? NOT FOR EVERYBODY**. And below it, By George Mahdesian. Alys read the accompanying interview slowly while Hoffman fidgeted at her shoulder. It was a simple and merciless story, a searing sketch related with an air of bland innocence as if the writer were not really aware of its devastating effect. "I see," she murmured. She glanced at Mahdesian. "Your work?"

He inclined his head. "That's what it says."

"Don't lower yourself by talking to him, Alys," Hoffman advised coldly. He was trying hard to maintain a posture of lofty dignity. "He'll have plenty of chance to explain later, in court."

"Now, Dad, don't fly off the handle."

"In court," Hoffman repeated. "I know my rights. I intend to sue the pants off him—and his newspaper, too. They can't get away with something like this. I'll show them just who they're dealing with by, God!"

Mahdesian didn't appear to be frightened. "All I wrote was what you told me, your own words. I'm sorry that you don't seem to like it."

"Don't like it!" Hoffman flared, his mask of aloofness crumbling. "I never said anything like that and you know it." He fumbled for the self-justifying explanation. "At

least, I didn't mean it the way it sounds, like I'm some kind of crumb."

"I just report. I don't try to judge."

"You had no right. What'd I ever do to you, anyway? I stood you drinks, let you use my phone, and then you go ahead and . . ." Hoffman stared down at the newspaper, a betrayed expression on his face. He whispered, "What's everybody going to think of me?"

His hurt bewilderment, like that of a small child punished for trespasses of which he was unaware made Alys' heart go out to him. Whatever his shortcomings, he was her father. She could not deny the cruel accuracy of the story. But though it was true, it was not the whole truth. It did not reveal the long years of frustration and disappointment that had made Al Hoffman the way he was. He had lost so much—perhaps without even realizing he had lost it—that it was only natural that he would clutch greedily at what little remained. For the first time, Alys knew she understood her father. She patted his shoulder comfortingly. "It's all right, Dad."

"But what am I going to do? Everybody will read it."

"You're going to ignore it—and wait on your customer."

"Wait on him?" exclaimed Hoffman, taken aback.

"After what he's done?"

"His money's the same as anyone else's," Alys said quietly. "Go ahead and get his breakfast."

Hoffman hesitated a moment and then, shaking his head confusedly, went into the kitchen. Mahdesian studied Alys uncertainly. "I don't want you thinking there was anything personal in this. It was, well, just business. I'm sorry it happened to your father."

"Why? Because I'm young and good-looking?"

That's only part of the reason. I had you figured wrong."

"Yes. When we were in the kitchen last night, you'd already written this story about Dad, hadn't you?"

Mahdesian flushed. "That's the rest of the reason I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too. Not because it happens to be my father you did this to. But because you hit a man who has no way of hitting back. He's too old even to beat you up. I don't deny the story is true, as far as it goes. But if it's truth you're after, why didn't you pick on somebody your own size? The sheriff for instance—he's a really good target."

"You're saying I don't have the guts."

"I'm trying to be like you—and not judge."

Mahdesian stared down at the counter, then his mouth quirked cynically. "Well, I guess you're right. I went for the easy mark. Thoreau's too big for me—he could fight back. I suppose what that adds up to is that I'm yellow." Mahdesian truly felt remorse, but in making himself out worse than he thought himself to be, he was automatically slipping into another pose for Alys' benefit. Certain women took pity on contrite men.

But Alys was shaking her head. "Don't cry over spilt milk, Mr. Mahdesian." She went around the counter towards the front door of the lodge.

"Wait—look, I'm really sorry. Maybe some day I can show you my good side. I think I've got one somewhere. You're going off to Paris, but—who knows? It's a long jump for a newspaperman but guys like me usually get ahead, one way or another."

"Don't look for me in Paris."

"Why not? You don't mean you intend to stick around a place like this, do you?"

Alys smiled faintly. Of all people, he had asked the question she had been trying to ask herself. "I don't know yet. Maybe I'll get to Paris some day. But it seems to me that I'd better learn to paint a ham sandwich before I take on the Mona Lisa."

She left Mahdesian. Her thoughts still fought in confusion, new ideas and values trying to make a proper pat-

tern, like coloured fragments in a kaleidoscope. She wanted to find Gib, talk to him; perhaps he could help her array her thoughts in a worth-while design. A couple of days ago, she reflected, I was sure I had to leave here to learn about life. But you don't have to chase life—it chases you, no matter where you are. Even if you want to hide from it, you can't. That's something to know . . .

She did not see Gib when she stepped out on to the porch. The helicopter had ceased its clatter and several cars, almost a caravan, were arriving at Hannah Crossing from the direction of the highway. One was a panel truck lettered KWM-TV Mobile Camera Unit # 1 and another sedan had a press card taped to the wind-shield. More reporters, competition for the local press. Competition of another sort brought up the rear, an ungainly vehicle with a high roof and glass sides, a refreshment stand on wheels—a sight designed to blight further Al Hoffman's day. Maybe it's a good thing, Alys reflected; it may take his mind off the newspaper story. Even vultures have their uses.

She glanced upwards, smiling involuntarily at the aptness of her thought since in the air above soared a real vulture—or at least its local equivalent, the California condor. Then her smile faded in puzzlement. The condors were quite rare, particularly this close to man's settlements. They seldom showed themselves unless attracted by carrion . . .

Mildly curious, Alys looked around for a clue. At the same instant, she saw Gib Scott. Mounted, he came towards her from the mouth of Portal Canyon, trailed by Restibo on another horse. As they hit the flat land, their horses broke into a trot.

Alys felt a surge of excitement. She waved and ran down the steps to meet them. Gib did not return the wave and, a moment later, she realized why. Both his hands were occupied, one with the reins of his own horse, the other holding the reins of a third horse, riderless, that trotted after them. Across the saddle lay a blanket-wrapped something. For an

instant longer, Alys did not understand. Then she saw their grim expressions and, high above, the circling condor.

She knew. They had found Janie and she was dead. Alys heard herself scream from a long distance away as the world spun around her.

Lowry dismounted and stared blankly back at the miles of wilderness behind him. From the ridge, a spur below Silver Peak, he could see all the way across Faro Valley. He had spent the entire night combing it without success and now the mountains lay before him again. He had begun to wonder if Janie Cooper had actually come this way at all. Perhaps he had made some horrible mistake and he would never find her. She might even be back at Hannah Crossing by now, blurting out the truth about him.

"Stop it," he said aloud, fighting down panic. "You know you're on the right track. You can't go to pieces now. Ritchie's dead and buried and, when you catch up with the child, you'll be completely safe. It's just a matter of hanging on a little longer."

But he was so tired, and Silver Peak loomed up in front of him like an impassable barrier. Beyond that, he knew, lay other mountains, perhaps stretching away for ever, against whose slopes he would toil for the rest of his life. But that's impossible, he thought; my classes start up again next week and I must be there to teach them. The idea struck him as so bizarre, so far removed from his present circumstances that he began to laugh and, once started, found he could not stop. He sank down to a sitting position amid the weeds, gasping with laughter until tears of exhaustion ran down his cheeks.

His horse, grazing nearby, did not heed his bellows of weird mirth. At last, Lowry got a grip on himself. His laughter ceased and became panting. He was shaken by

the violence of his outburst; he had always prided himself on control. What was happening to him, anyway? First, the ungovernable rage that had culminated in the old prospector's death and now this. It wasn't like him.

I'll just sit here for a while and rest, he decided. He leaned his head against his knee, staring at the ground. Below him, a large red ant was painfully traversing a tiny clearing, bearing a tremendous—for him—straw upon his back. The ant encountered the immense obstacle of Lowry's boot heel and began to explore a way to surmount it. Lowry watched the little creature, bemused. He doesn't even know I'm here, he reflected, or even that I exist. Yet I can shape his whole life, even end it completely.

It was the kind of conception he needed, comforting him, and once again the old feeling of superiority suffused him. He was better than anyone, a fact that he had come close to forgetting in his momentary discouragement. And since this was true, he would accomplish his mission, come what might. With renewed determination Lowry raised his head and regarded the mountain before him.

Scrutinizing it, he noted the bare spots, like mange on an animal's coat, that indicated the old mine workings and their slag heaps. Midway up the mountains, a circle of underbrush stood out more verdantly than the surrounding chaparral, the greenness trailing away down the slope, giving the appearance of a giant comma set against the hillside. It must be a spring of some sort, Lowry decided. I'll head for there first. The horse needs water, both of us do, for that matter. And it's entirely possible that the kid . . .

Abruptly, he sucked in his breath. Studying the patch of green, he had seen something move. He rose to a kneeling position, hardly daring to believe. But it had not been a shadow, or the stirring of the wind. On the slope opposite him, not over two hundred yards away was another human being.

And then he saw the red jacket, a flash of brilliant colour against the grey-green of the mountain. An instant later, he could detect the owner of the jacket, a small-figure toiling up the slope from the spring. He had caught up with her at last!

Lowry's hands shook as he picked up his rifle. With a great effort, he steadied them. "Take your time," he breathed aloud. He couldn't allow himself to miss again. Slowly, he drew a bead on the back of the red jacket, fixing the telescopic sight in the exact centre. Janie was approaching a small clearing. In another moment she would be completely in the open, the perfect target. Lowry held his breath, waiting. Another second, another step . . .

"Now!" he whispered, and squeezed the trigger.

The shot sent echoes rolling out across the valley but Lowry scarcely heard them. His entire attention was concentrated on the small figure opposite him. For just an instant, he believed sickeningly that he had missed. But then he gasped in triumph as he watched Janie tumble to the ground, roll over once and come to a halt. She did not move again and Lowry knew that it was all over. He was safe at last.

"Better make certain," he muttered and rose. Looking down, he discovered the ant. Still carrying its heavy load, it had undertaken an arduous detour on its journey home. Lowry watched it a moment longer and then deliberately crushed it with his boot. "Now you know," he said. He began to laugh again.

Gib leaped from his horse and caught Alys as she staggered, preventing her from falling. "It isn't Janie!" he told her divining the reason for her faintness. Alys stared at him blankly, uncomprehending, and he shook her slightly. "Do you hear me, Alys? It isn't Janie!"

She understood after a moment and strength seemed to

come back with the understanding. Gib released her and she stood alone. "It isn't Janie," Alys repeated in a whisper of relief. "Then who——"

She made an involuntary movement towards the blanket-shrouded figure across the saddle. Restibo, sitting wearily astride his horse, held up a restraining hand. "I wouldn't," he advised. "It isn't pretty."

"Old Man Ritchie," Gib told her. But before he could give any further explanation, they were engulfed by a swarm of people from the lodge, drawn forth by Alys' scream. Thoreau was in the lead, closely followed by the newspapermen—including those newly arrived—and others, Coast Guardsmen, ambulance drivers, and some deputies that Gib hadn't seen before. They converged on the little group from all sides, jostling to see, filling the air with questions.

Thoreau waved his arms for quiet. "What's happened?" he demanded of Restibo. "Where you been, anyway?"

"We took the dogs out again. They led us to him. It's the missing prospector."

"So the lion got him, after all."

"He was shot," Restibo said. "In the back. We got ourselves a murder."

Matthew Cooper pushed his way through the crowd, his wife close behind. "Who's been shot?" he cried anxiously. "What is it? For God's sake, let me through!" He discovered the focus of their attention and his face paled. His lips moved but no sound emerged.

Gib said quickly, "It's not what you think. It isn't Janie—grab her!" This time it was Esther Cooper who needed strong arms to support her. Gib grinned wearily at Alys. "Who's next?"

Alys smiled back weakly. She felt a trifle ashamed of herself for nearly fainting a moment before but in a way she was glad, too. It had seemed natural and right for Gib to be there to hold her when she needed him, like the answer she

had been seeking. She wondered if Gib had felt it, too. Probably not, since he had released her so quickly. She longed to be able to talk to him. But now was not the time or the place. She turned instead to the other woman. "Lean on me," she suggested. "I know just how you feel."

Esther murmured, "I thought—when I saw it——"

"It's someone else. Someone you don't even know."

"Thank God," Cooper said fervently. "I guess that's a pretty selfish thing to say, but I can't help it."

Thoreau had received the facts from his chief deputy and now he swung back to the others. "Okay," he said impatiently, "break it up. We got work to do."

"Come on, sheriff," one of the newspapermen called, "let's have the story."

"You've heard as much as we know," Thoreau said, pushing them aside. "His name's Ritchie and he's been shot. I'll give you the details later."

The reporters hesitated, still clamouring questions. Then, almost at the same instant, they broke for the lodge and the one telephone at Hannah Crossing. Mahdesian, possessor of the longest legs, was in the lead as they thundered up the steps.

Thoreau tossed the reins of the pack horse to one of the ambulance drivers. "You've got a passenger. Get him to the country morgue. We'll want an immediate post. Tell the lab to stand by to run a check on the bullet, if there is one." He gestured at Gib and Restibo. "Come on, we've got some figuring to do."

The three men strode off towards the parking lot, followed closely by the deputies and the helicopter crew. Alys trailed along behind, declining Cooper's offer to share in some reviving coffee. She still hoped for the opportunity to speak to Gib, although he didn't appear to be aware of her presence. But she was not offended by his neglect. She had given him no reason to act otherwise and now she must wait.

"Where's that dog trainer?" Thoreau demanded of Restibo as they reached the official station wagon.

"We left Wiegand with the Honour Ranch men. He's going to use his bloodhounds to hunt through Devilgut with them." Restibo added, "Say, sheriff—our ranger friend has some pretty conclusive information about this murder."

"Oh?" Thoreau turned on Gjb. "You theorizing now?"

"No, but I'm in charge of this area, and I'm supposed to know who's around. Besides Ritchie, there were only four other men even close on Thursday. Restibo agrees that all signs point to Thursday as the day Ritchie died. The three men were Hoffman, Cooper, Laughlin and this other camper."

"Cooper's out," said Thoreau.

"That's what we thought. Fell Laughlin's out, too—not only because I know him too well, but because he spent the day in town with his wife and only stopped by the lodge that night to say hello and have a beer. Hoffman—he was busy at the lodge all day."

"How do you know nobody sneaked into those mountains of yours?"

"Because I've been over the ground enough times since the girl got lost. I'd have seen some signs of a stranger."

"Well," Thoreau agreed, "you do kind of narrow it down to this other camper."

"He's the only one left. I'm not pretending to be a detective, but when there's only two men in a given area and one of them's shot in the back . . . The other man owns a gun, all right, a Marlin rifle. Besides, I happen to know that he and Ritchie didn't get along. Ritchie was a pretty cantankerous old soul, took a real delight in rubbing people the wrong way. It's possible he finally went too far."

Thoreau said to one of the deputies, "Get on the radio and have the office put out an all-points on this fellow—what's his full name, anybody know without checking?"

"Calvin Lowry," Gib said. "He's a professor at the college."

"One of those egghead boys, huh? Well, we'll see just how smart he is. Have the city cops check out his home—they'll probably be able to get a picture of him from his wife. Alert the highway patrol and, oh, buzz the sheriff's office at Imperial and pass the word along." Thoreau had been somewhat out of his depth in searching for a lost child but pursuit of a murderer was more familiar ground. "Restibo, soon as the radio's clear, notify the posse to arrest Lowry on sight and bring him in."

Gib put in quickly, "Let's not forget to keep our eyes on the ball. Our main job is still to find Janie Cooper."

"I'm aware of that. But Lowry's been unreported since yesterday morning. He may be trying to make a getaway."

"It's not likely. In the first place, he can't know that we've found Ritchie. The way that rock was pushed on top of him, Lowry probably feels pretty confident nobody'll ever find him. If he'd been worried, would he have hung around to help in the search? Nobody forced him to." Gib nodded towards the far end of the parking lot, where a middle-aged sedan stood in the shade of a pine tree. "That's his car."

"Well, what do you suggest?" Thoreau demanded. "We just sit and wait for him to give himself up?"

"In a way, yes. We've got a general idea where Lowry is—somewhere out there in Devilgut, or maybe even as far east as Faro Valley. But he's not on the run. I suggest we take advantage of his ignorance. Restibo and I will make a swing out in the helicopter—I want to check the position of the posse, anyway—and we can look for Lowry at the same time." Gib saw that Thoreau was unconvinced. "What I'm trying to say is that we shouldn't detour the search for Janie at this stage of the game to go after Lowry when he's bound to fall into our net, anyway. What's more important—finding a lost child or chasing a killer?"

Thoreau hesitated, grimacing. Restibo put in, "He may be right, chief. Time's getting short for the girl—and we can always pick up Lowry later."

"Okay," Thoreau agreed, grumbling. "Play it your way. But if you don't turn up anything in the helicopter, I'm going to have to figure that Lowry is running—and act accordingly."

Gib bit his lip, angered at the imposition of this new deadline which served to place one more obstacle in his way, when there were already so many. But he did not argue, since it would only waste time that was short anyway. He spoke to the helicopter pilot. "You ready to fly?"

"It's my lifetime ambition," Copitas said. He yelled out, "Come on, Pappy. The tour leaves at once."

As Gib waited for the other men to clamber into the aircraft, he heard his name called and whirled, to see Alys running across the parking lot towards him. He strode to meet her, wondering at her flushed and anxious expression. "Alys—what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She was panting a little. "I just wanted to say—well——"

"Oh." He thought he understood and his heart sank. "It's Saturday, isn't it? I guess you'll be gone before I get back."

"No," she said. "I was afraid that's what you thought. It's not so, Gib."

The Beach Buggy's starter whined and the big rotor blades began to revolve slowly. Gib frowned. "I don't get it. Aren't you leaving to-day?"

"Not to-day," Alys yelled above the roar of the engine. Her hair was blowing wildly and it was not the way she had imagined she would tell him, but that didn't matter, as long as he understood. "Not at all. I can't explain it now. Later—when you come back."

He blinked incredulously. "You mean you're not going away?"

Restibo leaned out of the cockpit to yell, "Come on, Gib—let's go!"

Alys pulled down Gib's face for a quick fervent kiss. "Now go on," she commanded. "Janie needs you, darling—you're the only one who can find her. But then come back to me because I need you, too."

He nodded, looking bewildered, and turned to the helicopter. Half-way up the ladder, he leaned down to kiss her again and his grin showed that he understood at last. The door banged shut behind him. Immediately, the helicopter churned its way upwards. Nose-heavy, it slid away from Hannah Crossing, gaining altitude and speed. A moment later, it was gone to the east, vanishing over the first range of hills.

Alys, in the grip of a strange and confident serenity, watched it disappear. She smoothed her hair proudly. Gib will find her, she thought, and Gib will come back to me, and together we'll . . . She nodded definitely several times as she walked towards the lodge to wait for him.

Janie listened intently, but the sound, whatever it had been, did not come again. It had been faint and muffled. Her first thought was that it had been a gun shot. But she couldn't be sure and by now she was coming to doubt her senses. In the strange world in which she wandered she couldn't be sure of anything.

Wearily, she started down the trail once more. What little strength she had gained from her night's rest had proved to be only temporary and by now had been entirely dissipated. She was more tired than before, each step weighing heavily. Only the fact that the trail led downwards requiring a minimum of effort to follow it, kept her moving at all.

Gone too was the satisfaction she had received from giving the present to Hemich-cha. The old Indian woman had

been obviously pleased and her pleasure had been sufficient to lift Janie's spirits for the moment. Feeling proud of herself, she had struck out on her journey almost gaily. And it had been a nice present, she reflected. Hemich-cha had scarcely any clothes—at least, not any decent ones—and the red jacket would help her keep warm during the cold nights. But now, as every step took her farther away from Hemich-cha, all she could think of was her own predicament. What was going to happen to her?

She reached level ground, the base of the mountain. Here lay a flat sandy wash, a dry stream bed that curved away and lost itself among the lesser hills. It was dotted with groves of alders and cottonwoods, which seemed to increase in number upstream. This argued the presence of water, a fact Janie knew from experience might be important.

However, to her dismay, the path appeared to cross the stream bed and narrow into the uninviting sagebrush hills on the other side. It was an overgrown course, not much more than a rabbit-run, and Janie stared unhappily at the prospective ordeal of getting her face and body switched with branches again.

Punishment, ran her confused thoughts. I must have done something I deserve to be punished for. What did I do wrong that day? Was I spying?

She jerked her wandering mind back to the problem of the trail. The broad wash seemed the logical way for anyone to go. But the path plainly led into the cruel brush opposite. She tried to remember Hemich-cha's pantomimed directions, but they had been vague at best and perhaps the old woman had been telling her about two trails, a hard one and an easy one. For all Janie knew, they both might lead to the same place. Yet, if they didn't, and she should choose the wrong one . . .

She came to an agonizing decision. She would have to explore one, at least for a little way. If it seemed to be getting her nowhere, she could always come back and take

the other fork. That added up to perhaps twice as much effort, at a time when she had no stomach for any effort at all, but there was no alternative.

Yet there was no reason she couldn't choose the easiest course first, and keep her fingers crossed that it was the right choice. She began to trudge up the sandy wash towards the first inviting clump of trees. Then she stopped and slowly retraced her steps. What if, upon returning, she wasn't able to find the junction of the two trails? From bitter experience, Janie had learned that the wilderness had a frustrating trick of seeming to change appearance, almost while your back was turned. She had to mark her trail some way.

She had given the red jacket to Hemich-cha, but still wore her green hair-ribbon. She removed it. A dead yucca stood squarely between the two forks of the trail. Janie tied the green ribbon to the tall thin spire. The ribbon fluttered faintly in the breeze, plainly visible from all sides. She could hardly miss seeing it from any direction.

This done, she turned again to the dry stream bed, her moccasins crunching softly in the coarse sand. Before she entered the first stand of cottonwoods she looked back and could still glimpse the green ribbon, and even detected her own trail coming towards her. Reassured, she began to walk forward up the sandy canyon, hoping that she was on the right path at last.

It was a leisurely two-hour drive from the city to Hannah Crossing and so the majority of the curiosity seekers didn't arrive until mid-morning. Since it was Saturday, a holiday for most job-holders, a large number made the trek, bringing their children and picnic lunches. They poked around the lodge inquisitively and asked questions of any who would answer. But there wasn't much to see and many of them drifted away to more attractive localities.

Not all of those who arrived this Saturday morning came

to gape, however. A large caravan from Cooper Corporation, Matthew Cooper's electronic manufacturing company, showed up, ready to work in any way required and to join in the search itself if needed. Cooper and his wife were deeply touched by this unsolicited display of loyalty, but there was little the employees could do but share the vigil. The fate of Janie Cooper was being decided elsewhere.

"It wouldn't surprise me a bit," Restibo said over his shoulder, "that if we should wind this thing up right this minute, Thoreau would want to fush the posse back to town for his precious rodeo. I think I'd tell him off even if it meant my job—which it would. What are you grinning at, anyway?"

"I didn't know I was," Gib told him. He had hardly paid any attention to Restibo's grumbling, his thoughts still back at the parking lot with Alys. It had all happened so quickly, the complete and wonderful reversal, that he could scarcely believe in it. Only by going over the whole thing time after time in his mind could he make it real. Now, reluctantly, he wrenched his attention back to the matter in hand. He tapped the pilot on the shoulder. "Swing over to the left a little. We should be spotting the posse soon."

The helicopter cruised slowly above the choppy badlands of Devilgut in the vast saucer between Breadloaf on the west and Silent Ridge on the east. The eroded wasteland below had no apparent pattern, even from the air. It looked as if it had been struck again and again by some giant cleaver, haphazard criss-cross blows, leaving only a bewildering maze. From this vantage point, it was easy to understand how anyone might get lost in Devilgut.

"Flash of light at two o'clock," announced Copitas, pointing ahead. "Probably a reflection of something."

Peck fiddled with the radio. "Helicopter to Red and Blue leaders. Let's hear from you." He waited a moment, listen-

ing to something in the earphones. "Stand by. Okay, I got 'em."

Restibo took over the microphone and asked if anybody had seen Lowry. Then they all waited. "They're checking their teams," Restibo murmured. Finally, he said into the microphone, "Okay, get this. If you do run across him, put him under arrest, suspicion of murder. No, not the kid—some old man. Spread the word and don't take any chances. He's armed." Restibo craned his neck to look at Gib. "Any other instructions?"

"Tell them to keep coming. Another hour, they should be joining up with the rest from the road camp." Gib chewed his lip, considering, while Restibo signed off. "Almost looks like neither Janie nor Lowry is still in Devilgut. Yet we know they both went into it. Seems funny that Lowry would just keep on going."

"Unless Thoreau's right and he's really running away."

"You know that doesn't make sense."

"Where now?" Copitas asked. "Back the way we came?"

"Not yet. Cut over to the east." Gib pointed away to the right towards the bald summit of Silver Peak. Obeying his instructions, the Beach Buggy slid forward from the tangle of Devilgut. The ground rose towards them, crested at Silent Ridge and then dipped again into the broad green expanse of Faro Valley. Gib said thoughtfully, "Running away."

"What?" asked Restibo, not hearing him above the clatter of the engine.

Gib didn't repeat. Instead, he said slowly, speaking directly into Restibo's ear, "Something just occurred to me. I had the feeling last night that something was chin-whiskered about, Janie's disappearance. Certain things didn't add up. Like that telescope being found in Mine's Gap and the bloodhounds leading us in the opposite direction. Her walking in the stream. And Ritchie disappearing at the same time. Now Lowry is missing, too."

"What're you getting at?"

"That maybe it's Janie running away, and not Lowry."

"Who from? And why?"

"From Lowry," Gib said. "Suppose Janie saw him kill Ritchie." Restibo jerked around in his seat, staring at him. "Think about it a minute. Janie doesn't wander the way most lost kids do. She runs, and keeps on running—like somebody is after her. I found Lowry the first night down in Devilgut, looking for something. He said it was Big Ben. Was it? And the telescope in Miner's Gap that threw us off for so long, and might have thrown us off permanently except for the dogs. Suppose it was put there by Lowry for just that reason while he went after Janie. He had the opportunity, the first night. And it seems to me now that he was pretty eager to go off on his own, didn't even stop to sleep."

"You're just guessing, Gib. You can't even be sure it was Lowry who killed the old man."

"Yeah. But I am sure of one thing—both Janie and Lowry are still missing. You got a better answer?"

"No," Restibo admitted. "But I hope there is one. Lowry has a twenty-four hour head start on us."

"Yeah," Gib agreed and they looked at each other bleakly. "We got to do more than just find Janie now. We got to find her first."

They broke off conversation and began to scan the ground below. They had crossed the width of Faro Valley and now skirted the base of Silver Peak, passing over the weathered scars which marked the old mine shafts. Gib was leaning over to direct Copitas to gain altitude, remembering his intention to seek out the old Indian woman Hemich-cha, when Restibo seized his arm. "What's that red thing?"

Gib tried to look, but the helicopter had already passed over the spot to which Restibo pointed. Without being told, Copitas swung the craft around in a wide circle, retracing

their flight. Both men peered intently below for another glimpse of what Restibo had seen. "There!" Restibo cried. "Over near that patch of green."

Gib put his field glasses to his eyes and Copitas skilfully held the Beach Buggy motionless above the mountainside. Gib lowered the glasses, his expression stony. "Let's go down."

"What is it?" Restibo asked anxiously, reaching for the binoculars.

"It looks like a body." Gib hesitated and, though he knew the answer already, put it like a question. "What colour jacket was Janic wearing?"

"Red," Restibo said unwillingly. "Is that what I saw?"

"Yeah," Gib muttered. "I guess we lost the race."

The helicopter began to descend.

Jerry McCurdy had made good time. He had slipped away from the other prisoners almost immediately upon halting at the mouth of Devilgut, pausing only long enough to steal an extra canteen of water. It had taken him all night to cross the badlands, but he was blessed with a rare sense of direction and by mid-morning he was well into Faro Valley, headed roughly north-east. His small frame, lean as a coyote, packed a surprising reserve of endurance and he was still buoyed up by the exhilaration of his escape.

Some might consider that he had merely exchanged a smaller prison for a larger, but not Jerry McCurdy. The wilderness did not awe or frighten him. An orphan, he had spent some years, by court order—on a Colorado work farm for under-privileged boys. The moral training received, there had not made any appreciable impression, but the physical training stood him in good stead now. He was at home in rough country, unlike the bulk of his fellow

prisoners at the Honour Ranch, and he had no doubt as to his ability to master it. On the contrary, he had quite a definite plan in mind.

Dolores had brought him a map and he had fixed it firmly in his mind before destroying it. Relying on his memory, McCurdy felt sure that he was headed for the county line. It was still a good many miles distant—perhaps two more days' walk—but it was there and he would reach it. The supply of food in his pack was ample if he was frugal. As for water, well, it could always be found if one knew where to look.

Ahead of him lay a sandy wash, the bed of a stream. It was dry now, awaiting the winter rains. But farther upstream, McCurdy glimpsed the green tops of trees, cottonwoods, a sure sign of the presence of water, either on the surface or close beneath. One of his canteens was empty, the other would not last the day. McCurdy began to follow the curving course of the stream bed. It was the logical course, anyway, since water usually sought the easiest route through the mountains.

Two days, he thought, maybe even to-morrow—and I'll be in the next county. What then? Well, he'd find a road that would lead him to a telephone and then a call to Dolores . . . Or perhaps he wouldn't bother to call Dolores, at all. She'd been pretty reluctant to help him when he originally decided to crash out of the Honour Ranch. All that talk about maybe he shouldn't, maybe he should serve his time and get a job . . . What a bunch of crap! Now that he thought about it, he wondered if she had even been on the highway waiting for him last night. She had some pretty funny ideas, so many women did, and maybe he'd be a sucker to trust her again. There were always plenty of other women who liked the way he talked, there always had been. Why should he saddle himself with somebody like her, particularly in Mexico where he'd heard that the pickings were good? Still, there was something about Dolores that kind

of got under his skin, might as well admit it . . . Well, he didn't have to decide now, anyway, plenty of time later on when . . .

Something strange caught his attention, breaking his train of thought, and he stared. What the hell's that? he asked himself, gazing at the tall yucca that stood like a grey spear on the bank of the wash. From the thin trunk fluttered a gay-coloured piece of cloth, like a small green pennant. Curious, McCurdy climbed up the sloping bank to investigate, thinking that perhaps the wind had impaled it upon one of the yucca stalks. But in that case where had it come from in the first place?

The wind was not responsible, he discovered. The green streamer had been tied on the stalk, clumsily, but definitely knotted. Funny thing to find out here, he thought. It hasn't even begun to fade. Reminds me of . . .

"A hair ribbon," he said aloud. "A girl's hair ribbon."

Until this moment, McCurdy had nearly forgotten the circumstances which accounted for his presence here. They'd been looking for a lost kid, a little girl—and he, of all persons, had found her trail. McCurdy looked around keenly, seeking other confirming evidence. He found it. From the bank, he could gaze out across the sand and there, faintly evident, was the impress of small footprints. By God, the kid had come this way!

His excitement ebbed as he realized his position. "What do I do now?" he muttered. He held the key to the girl's rescue—but did he dare reveal it? The knowledge was of no value unless he shared it. Yet that meant turning back, giving himself up, when freedom was almost within his grasp. He couldn't do that, not for the sake of some brat he'd never seen. That would be the sucker's way, not the way of Jerry McCurdy.

He walked away a few steps, leaving the ribbon fluttering on the yucca, and halted irresolutely. "Somebody else will find her," he said aloud, as if in argument. But would they?

The search parties were miles behind. Perhaps they weren't even headed in this direction. In that case, the little girl didn't have a chance. She'd already been lost a long time and maybe even now she . . . "No!" he exclaimed and slammed his fists together. "She's not my worry. What'd anybody ever do for me?"

Just the same, he continued to stand there, glancing now and then at the green ribbon. It hung limply now, deserted even by the breeze, as if it too had given up hope. McCurdy gritted his teeth angrily. Nobody'll ever know, he told himself; it was only an accident that I happened to see it. But you did see it, the other part of his mind reminded him—and you'll know . . .

McCurdy turned around abruptly and strode back to the yucca. He unknotted the hair ribbon and shoved it in his pocket. Then, grim-faced, he turned back the way he had come. The crunch of his shoes on the sand seemed to mock him. Sucker, sucker . . . "Shut up!" he commanded them silently. You're right, but I got to do it. At least, Dolores would probably approve, if that mattered to him. And there would be other opportunities, he'd see to that.

He continued to argue with himself and, being thus engrossed, did not spy the horseman until he was nearly upon him. McCurdy was so surprised at the sudden materialization—he had confidently believed the search parties miles away—that he nearly turned and ran. A glance at the rifle across the saddle told him this would be an error. He forced a smile. "Hi," he called.

The horseman's body jerked, as if he had not seen McCurdy at all, although he was looking directly at him. He reined in his horse, which had been proceeding only at a slow walk anyway, and sat staring at the man on foot. "Who are you?" he inquired, almost in a whisper.

McCurdy narrowed his eyes. The horseman, a tall slender fellow in sweat-stained hiking clothes, was obviously not an official of any sort. Was it possible that he didn't recognize

McCurdy's own road camp uniform for what it was? Maybe there was still hope. McCurdy said cautiously, "I'm looking for the kid that's lost. Got separated from the others during the night. I don't know exactly what happened but——" He stopped, puzzled, realizing that the other man wasn't even listening.

"Where is she?" the man on the horse said, in the same whispering monotone. "I know she's close, but I can't find her. I've been looking for such a long time."

"That's what I was going to tell you." McCurdy drew forth the green ribbon. "I found this about a half-mile back on the bank of the river bed. Footprints, too, going upstream."

The horseman took the ribbon and fondled it slowly as if he enjoyed the feel of it. McCurdy, watching him closely, said, "I would have followed it up myself, but I thought I'd better come back—hey, watch it!" He had to scramble aside to avoid being trampled as the other man spurred his horse forward. He seemed to have forgotten McCurdy's existence. He mumbled, "I'll get her this time," but he appeared to be speaking to himself only.

McCurdy extricated himself from the manzanita and watched the horseman ride out of sight. What do you think of that? he asked himself, and couldn't find an answer. Anyway, it had worked out better than he could have hoped. He had done the right thing and the girl would be okay now. As for himself, well, there was nothing stopping him from going on about his business. Jerry McCurdy felt good about everything.

"It's Henrich-cha," Gib said, gently turning over the tiny figure. "Shot in the back."

"Seems to be Lowry's trademark," Restibo agreed grimly. "It's going to be a pleasure to take him in."

Yet despite the bleak pity they felt for the old woman,

struck down without warning, each was conscious of relief, also. Gib put it into words. "She was old and she wanted to die here on Silver Peak. It could have been Janie."

"It still might be," Restibo reminded him. "Where do we go from here?"

They had to shout to make themselves heard above the roar of the helicopter. Lacking a flat place to land, it hovered just above their heads, its rope ladder dangling like an anchor. Copitas peered down at them curiously.

"We're catching up," Gib said. "The body's still warm."

"The sun could account for that. It's a hot day."

"No, Hemich-cha was shot by mistake. Lowry thought she was Janie, because of the red jacket. So it had to happen by daylight—when it was light enough for Lowry to see some distance." Gib indicated the soft ground that had been churned by a horse's hooves. "By now, Lowry knows it wasn't Janie."

"He knows something else. He's on the right track. The jacket proves it."

"Yeah. It's just a question of who gets to her first." Gib rose. "Give me your pistol. I'm going to need it."

"You figuring on splitting up?"

"I want you to get back to the posse as fast as that thing will fly. Start picking up search teams—you can probably carry about six men to a load. Set them down in a line across the other end of Faro Valley and have them proceed towards me. A damn shame we can't fly the horses, too, but I think we'll be able to corner Lowry between your men and me."

"You going after Lowry on foot?" Restibo objected.

"He's got a horse and a head start. Better stick with the helicopter, Gib, or you'll never catch up."

"I can't follow a trail from the air. Once Lowry gets under the trees, I'd never see him. Let me have the gun." Reluctantly, Restibo gave him the short-barrelled revolver.

"I got one thing in my favour. I'll be trailing a horse while Lowry is trying to follow a small child. I think I got a chance."

"How about her?" Restibo asked, nodding at the dead woman.

"Later on, we'll bury her here on the mountain, the way she wanted it. But right now, we've got to think about the living."

"Good luck," Restibo said and shook Gib's hand quickly. He scrambled up the rope ladder. At the door of the helicopter, he called, "Wait a minute," and then dropped a handie-talkie which Gib caught. "So you can keep in touch," he shouted. "If you need us, and we're in hearing range . . ." The rotor blades spun more fiercely and the Beach Buggy began to rise. It swung away to the west and Gib was alone on the mountain, except for the dead woman.

He slung the handie-talkie over his shoulder. So you can keep in touch, Restibo had said. But Gib knew better. The electronic device could conquer space, but it could not conquer time, and time was now the vital factor. Beyond the shimmering blue haze into which the helicopter had disappeared lay help, great quantities of it. But it was there and he was here—he and Lowry and Janie. The next hour belonged to the three of them alone. More exactly, to him—since Janie's and Lowry's roles were already set. All that had gone before was merely the overture to this final hour. The fate of Janie Cooper, that had been the property of so many hands during the past two days, now rested squarely in his own. Her life hinged on what he did or failed to do. He was content that it should be so, finding in the knowledge justification of his existence.

He said a prayer, short and to the point. "Don't let me make any mistakes."

The horse's trail led north, down the slope of Silver Peak towards the dry bed of the little Sweetwater River. Clutch-

ing his borrowed pistol, Gib began to follow it at a rapid trot.

The breeze at her back seemed to encourage her to keep walking. "Nice breeze—help me along." She spoke aloud occasionally to remind herself of what she was doing. The sunlight was making everything dance so that she often had to rub her squinting eyes. She didn't know how far she had come since leaving the fork in the trail, but to her numbing legs it felt like miles. And, so far, she had discovered nothing to indicate that she was on the right track. Nor on the wrong track, either. She kept plodding forward, hoping that at any minute she would glimpse something—she was past even trying to imagine what—that would reassure her.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . ."

She walked almost continually among trees now, alders and cottonwoods and live-oaks. The forest was broken infrequently by clearings filled with river grass, brown in the September heat, but evidence of the stream that occasionally passed this way. There were other signs that she followed a watercourse, too. Here and there lay a quiet pool, shallow and scummy, mirroring the cliffs which thrust up sharply on either side.

The ground gradually rose as she continued upstream and she paused oftener to rest. At one of her stops, she had gone off without the woven bag, her food supply—but by the time she remembered she was too tired to turn back. More than physical fatigue was wearing her down; she was staggering under an increasingly heavy burden of hopelessness. Each time she halted Janie found it harder to rise and go. How much rarer it would be simply to lie where she was, doing nothing but wait and wait. Though she didn't realize it—and wouldn't have understood it if someone had been there to put it into words—Janie was dangerously close to losing her will to live. Fear had sustained her, and then hope.

Now both were drained away and a terrible weariness had crept into their place.

"Daddy?"

No, there was no one there, after all. A sob wracked Janie's dry mouth. It was getting hard to remember her home and her parents as goals that she would eventually reach. They now seemed as remote in her past as her baby teeth. She could scarcely remember an existence that was not bounded by the endless wilderness. Only an instinct stronger than conscious will kept her stumbling forward.

She came at last to the end of the stream bed. She gazed dumbly for a while before she sank down abruptly under the crushing disappointment.

With the stream bed ended the ravine. The tall cliffs had closed together, blocking her way. She was in a box canyon. On three sides, the rugged walls reared up hundreds of feet over her dazed head, an insurmountable barrier for anyone but a skilled climber.

She had taken the wrong path, after all. She would have to go back.

"Mummy! Please!"

The anguished echo of her own voice surprised her and she put her hand over her mouth. She sat there, whimpering. A trickle of water, summer's remnant of winter's falls, splashed its way from some unknown channel above over the eroded rock face of the cliffs to feed the small pond at her feet. It, too, had come a long way to end here in the prison of the canyon. She knew then that she could go no farther. She gave up fighting.

"Now I lay me down to sleep . . ."

She fell over on the ground, face down beside the pool. Exhaustion claimed her at last and Janie slid away into the blessed peace of forgetfulness.

Calvin Lowry, too, had nearly reached the end of his

endurance. But he possessed one great advantage over his quarry: he did not have to depend upon his own legs to carry him. In a sense, he did not even have to depend upon his own will. Once headed up the canyon, his horse continued to plod forward without any directions from its rider. Lowry sat slack in the saddle, eyes staring blankly ahead.

He was in a state of shock, close to mental collapse. The discovery of his mistake, that he had killed the wrong person, had left him dazed. He moved now in a strange sort of dream from which reality had fled. A stubborn instinct kept him pursuing Janie Cooper's trail, but he had nearly forgotten why he did so. Lowry realized vaguely that it was somehow important that he find the child and kill her, yet the reasons for this action eluded him. Only by ridding himself of Janie could he find peace. It was as if, by some strange reversal, she pursued him.

"Find her soon," he mumbled. "Find her and kill her."

He no longer felt consciously tired. He had a detached, floating feeling in which it seemed that his sensations no longer occupied his body. It was as if there were two Calvin Lowrys, only one of which was carried by the plodding horse, while the other watched from somewhere far removed, a disinterested spectator.

He continued to ride on, up the faint trail that Janie had left in the dry creek-bed, while on either side the cliffs rose higher and higher and, above him, the trees closed in to obscure the sky. Lowry began to become obsessed with the worry that he would not recognize Janie when he saw her. Desperately, he cudgelled his memory to recall her appearance, but all that rose before him was the face of his wife, tearful and reproachful.

"Go away," he told her, but the vision persisted. "Go away!" he screamed. He flung up his rifle and fired at her.

The shot, its noise compressed by the canyon walls, startled him back into something approaching rationality. He looked about him, bewildered. Where was he? What

was he doing? He found that his horse had stopped in a tiny clearing as if awaiting some further command. Looking up, Lowry realized why. The rock walls closed in ahead of him, just beyond the next stand of timber. He had reached the end of the trail.

Slowly, his numbed mind reacted to this knowledge. The end of the trail for him meant the end of the trail for his quarry, also. He regarded the ground and noted the bent grass that marked her passage, a wavering path that disappeared into the trees. She was there, waiting for him.

Lowry drew a deep breath of anticipation and kicked his mount viciously with his boot heels. The horse indignantly leaped forward, nearly unseating him. He held tight to the saddlehorn with one trembling hand while the other clutched his rifle. They entered the trees. They passed a stagnant pool, another . . . and then Lowry jerked hard on the reins. Obediently, his horse halted. Lowry stared down, scarcely able to believe.

On the ground beside the final pool fed by the trickle of the stream lay the small dishevelled figure of a child, face down, her head pillowed on her arms. He had found her at last.

Janie was not aware of her enemy's presence. Defenceless before him, she did not stir and for a moment Lowry fancied that she was already dead. But then he marked her shallow breathing.

His gaze still upon her, Lowry dismounted. The horse freed of its rider, wandered off a few paces and began to drink from the pool. Lowry did not notice. He continued to stare down at the unconscious child as if mesmerized. Then, slowly, he raised his rifle.

Gib Scott, moving at a hurried jog, had reached the base of the mountain when he glimpsed a movement in the

chaparral ahead of him. The horse track that he followed was so fresh that he believed momentarily that he had caught up with Lowry. Triumphantly, he shouted Lowry's name and leaped forward, his pistol poised.

An instant later, he discovered his mistake. He had flushed a stranger, a small man in overalls, on foot. The other man was as surprised as Gib, and obviously panic-stricken as well. He cast one frightened glance at the ranger bearing down on him and turned to run. Then he apparently decided that flight would be useless and swung around to confront his pursuer.

"Hello," he greeted Gib, trying to smile. "Gosh, am I glad to see you!"

"Is that why you started to run away?"

"I guess I'm a little confused. I was out with one of the search parties and somehow I got separated from——"

"You mean you're the prisoner who went over the hill. I recognize the clothes."

"Okay," the little man admitted with a shrug. "No use arguing with a gun. I'm McCurdy. This just isn't my day, I guess. You going to take me in?"

"You can wait," Gib told him. "Right now I'm after a little girl. You seen anything of her?"

McCurdy hesitated, narrowing his eyes shrewdly. "Maybe yes, maybe no."

"What's that mean?"

"You do me a favour, I do you a favour. You're no cop, are you? Well, if you sort of forget where you saw me, I might be able to tell you something."

"Listen to me," Gib said between his teeth. "I'm in no mood to bargain with you. You talk and talk fast, or I'll put a bullet in your leg and leave you here for somebody else to find. Which way do you want it?"

His ferocity was so genuine that McCurdy paled. He held up his hands as if to ward off the threatened bullet. "Okay, okay," he said rapidly. "I'll talk. I found the kid's hair

ribbon back there"—he gestured along the trail behind him—"and her tracks too, going up the old river bed."

Gib said thickly, "And you were running off without telling anybody. For two cents, I'd shoot you anyway."

"I wasn't!" McCurdy cried plaintively. "I turned around and came back. Sure, I was trying to dodge you, but I'd already told the other fellow all about it, and why shouldn't I——"

"What other fellow?"

"The guy on the horse, the tall fellow. I gave him the hair ribbon, just ask him if I didn't."

"My God!" Gib whispered. "You told Lowry where to find her!"

"Sure," McCurdy agreed triumphantly, "You see, you got no reason to be so rough on me."

"How long ago was this?"

"Twenty minutes, half-hour. I got no watch. The way he took off, he's probably found her by now." McCurdy nodded, vindicated. "She'll be all right. Hey, where you going?"

Gib was already past him, headed along the trail as fast as he could move. "What about me?" McCurdy yelled after him, but he did not pause to reply. What McCurdy did now didn't matter; whether he continued to run towards the drag-net in the next county or awaited for Thoreau's posse to apprehend him was of small concern, since the result would inevitably be the same. McCurdy had played his unwitting part, whether for good or evil was still to be decided, and it was now finished.

Panting, Gib reached the bank of the Little Sweetwater at last. He had not bothered to follow the hoof prints any longer, but now he discovered them again—and another trail besides. Stretching away up the dry river bed were the unmistakable impressions of small feet. They vanished up the canyon—Bonita Canyon it was called—and close beside them marched the deeper imprints of horse's hooves.

Gib did not hesitate. He plunged down the shallow bank and set off up Bonita Canyon at a dead run, his own booted feet making a third trail in the sandy ground.

He had reached the first grove of trees when he heard the shot in the distance.

Lowry came slowly out of the grove into the clearing, his rifle dragging behind him in one hand like a forgotten rudder. He stumbled a little as if walking in his sleep and his face was pale. His horse, its reins trailing, wandered after him and, when he halted, began to munch placidly on the dry grass.

In the middle of the clearing a large boulder lay, half-buried in the stream bed. Lowry sat down upon its smooth summit and fumbled his cigarettes from his shirt pocket. His fingers shook so much that he had difficulty in selecting one from the battered pack and even more difficulty in lighting it. Even then, he did not smoke it. When he raised his head to inhale, his gaze went back to the trees he had just left and he abruptly buried his face in his hands.

"Why?" he murmured in anguish. "What's happened to me?"

His eyes closed, he relived the moments just past as he had stood over the unconscious child. He saw himself raise the rifle barrel, steady it on the back of her head, his finger close against the trigger. . .

And then, at the last instant, he had not been able to do it. His finger had waited for the brain's command, and had waited in vain. He had stood there for what seemed an eternity, lacking only the slightest contraction of muscle to send the bullet speeding on its way, while his will faltered and his vision blurred. Finally, the rifle had been too heavy to hold and he had let it sink to the ground. Why?

Lowry didn't know. He had believed himself prepared for this ultimate moment. He had long ago convinced him-

self that Janie must die, and had hunted her down relentlessly for this end. It was the logical answer. But he was too exhausted to summon up the flare of hate and anger in which he had killed Ritchie, nor could he recover the thrill of panic when he had first shot at the distant watching child. This unconscious Janie at his feet was no far-off spot of red in his rifle sights. She was here, a human presence in whom he would be forced to watch the terrible mechanics of dying, his bullet splintering her head, her eyes and mouth flying open at the impact . . . and he would see her bleed. The vision made him retch. He had turned away and left her.

The moment had come, logic had failed him. He had betrayed himself.

I've got to think it out, he told himself desperately, conscious this time—as he had not been before—that sanity was slipping away from him. I've always been able to think things out before, that's what made me better than the others. Think, you damn failure! He sought avenues of escape, any course but the obvious one of returning to the grove which he knew he could never do again. Perhaps she's already dead. She didn't move and maybe . . . But she breathed, the other half of reason reminded him. It isn't that easy. You've got to do something, it's up to you.

"Why?" he asked aloud. "Why do I have to do anything at all?" He grasped at the idea eagerly. What if, instead, he did nothing but simply ride away? Who would ever find her? Who would ever know? Janie was obviously close to death from exhaustion and exposure. Another day, perhaps even another few hours, would finish her, sparing him from the task at which he had balked. Omission was infinitely easier than commission.

Lowry scrambled to his feet, grasping for his horse's reins. As he did so, he noticed the smoke curling up from among the river grass. He had failed to extinguish his unused cigarette. Where it had fallen, the brown grass was begin-

ning to smoulder. Automatically, Lowry moved to stamp out the incipient fire. Then he hesitated, watching the fire grow slowly in intensity at his feet. It began to move, spreading insidiously across the tinder-dry weeds. Fanned by the breeze, the blaze grew larger, creeping towards the grove where Janie Cooper lay.

Lowry backed off a few paces and stood staring at the kindling fire. This was the answer he had sought, supplied not by logic but by accident. The dry forest would embrace the flames eagerly, offering itself—and all that lay within it—as fuel. Already, the fire was spreading to the low sumac bushes, soon it would rise to the trees, an immense funeral pyre for Janie Cooper. Simply by letting nature take its course, he would be free at last, without any conscious action on his part at all. It had been taken out of his hands, Lowry thought gratefully. He really had nothing to do with what would happen now.

His horse whinnied nervously as the heat grew more intense, straining against the reins its master held. Lowry paid no attention. With rapt contemplation, he watched the flames lick higher until they reached the lower branches of the oak trees.

His legs ached and his lungs burned, but Gib Scott kept running. Yet though he moved rapidly up the sandy wash, his mind easily outdistanced his feet, trying to picture what lay ahead. He knew the showdown was imminent, since the three of them were in a box canyon. But what form the showdown would take, Gib did not know. The distant rifle shot had not been repeated and he didn't want to think of what this might portend. He prayed that he still might not be too late—and continued to run.

Then abruptly he halted as, from the forest ahead, a new sound reached his ears. It was the clatter of horse's hooves, coming towards him at a gallop. Gib planted himself in the

middle of the trail and raised his pistol with grim determination. Lowry was not going to pass.

The horse appeared, careening into view through the screen of trees. Wild-eyed, ears back, it pounded madly down upon him, obviously in the grip of elemental panic. The reins streamed out beside its body like a pennant. But the saddle was empty; the beast carried no rider in its headlong flight.

Gib dodged aside as the horse thundered past him, barely avoiding the flying hooves. A moment later, the animal was gone down the canyon, the sounds of its frenzied passage dying away. It had been Lowry's horse, Gib realized, as he scrambled to his feet—but where was Lowry? What had happened to make the horse, a veteran mount, stampede in such a manner?

Like an answer to his question, the acrid scent of smoke came to his nostrils . . . and he knew. The ever-present nightmare had become reality. The forest was on fire. Through accident or design, Lowry had set the torch to Gib's precious dominion. Swiftly, automatically, he unslung the handie-talkie on his back. There was still time—if the helicopter was within range of his signal. If the report went out now, without delay, the aircraft could bring deputies to curb the blaze before it became a catastrophe.

He swore, trying to bring in a signal. There was no answering call. He whirled towards the mouth of the canyon . . . and then he halted.

Somewhere at the end of the canyon was Janie Cooper. For her too, there could be no delay. But he could not save both. It was the forest or the child. The dilemma which he had once imagined, but had never expected to confront, was here. The choice was his, and his alone. She may already be dead . . . remember the shot . . . save what you can . . .

With a strangled curse that sounded like a sob, Gib flung the handie-talkie away. He began to run again, up the can-

yon towards the unseen fire. Overhead he heard the cries of fleeing birds. A fox scampered past, blind to his presence. A bounding rabbit hit against his belly, flopped scrabbling aside. The smoke thickened, sharpened as he ran until at last, breaking into a small clearing, he could see the source. On the other side of the open space, the flames danced in scarlet hysteria, soared upwards, mounting the trees to the sky.

More than the fire barred his way. Amid the swirling grey smoke, Gib glimpsed the figure of a man, a tall man whose once-handsome face held an expression of demoniac glee as he contemplated his handiwork. Gib scarcely recognized him as the debonair professor he had known. The flames reflecting redly from his fanatical face, Calvin Lowry resembled the Devil standing in the midst of his self-created Hell.

Lowry discovered Gib at the same instant. "Go back!" he screamed above the crackle of the flames. "Don't come any closer!"

"Where is she?" Gib yelled. "Where's Janie?"

"You're too late!" Lowry shouted, brandishing his rifle towards the blazing trees. "You can't save her now! I've won! I've beaten you all!" His reason completely gone, he capered about in a frenzy of triumph, oblivious to the searing heat that beat upon both men. "I did it! I did it!"

Gib experienced such a surge of hatred for the man before him, the callous author of needless death and now senseless destruction, that his vision blurred. A voice he did not recognize as his own croaked, "Get out of my way!"

"Get back!" Lowry shrieked in alarm and flung up his rifle. "You can't have her! She belongs to the fire! Get back—or I'll kill you, too!"

Gib paid no heed. He charged across the clearing, scarcely believing even in the face of Lowry's maniacal behaviour that he would actually shoot, and not really caring. All that

seemed important now was the knowledge that Janie, still alive, lay somewhere beyond the barrier of the flames. Lowry existed not as a threat to his own safety, but to Janie's. One way, or another, he must be hurled aside.

He saw the rifle buck against Lowry's shoulder and heard the bullet whine past his face, but felt no fear. One way or another . . . He squeezed the trigger of his borrowed pistol, once, twice, three times. Lowry, driven backwards by the impact of the bullets at close range, tumbled down into the smouldering ashes of the clearing. The path was open.

Except for the fire. Gib threw the pistol aside and whipped out his handkerchief. Taking a deep breath of the smoky air, he held the cloth against his mouth and nose and plunged into the reddish-white wall. The roaring heat seared him to the bone, striking from all sides with the fury of a million whips. His momentum carried him through the first sheet of flames, to the bank of a small pond. He threw himself headlong into the water, rolling over and over to absorb the pool's relative coolness. But he did not linger. Immediately, he sprang up, lunging forward while the water on his body and clothes dried and turned to steam. His chest cried out for air, his skin was on fire, his eyes felt as if they were cooking in their sockets as he peered ahead, seeking some glimpse of the child. Where is she? he implored desperately. Help me!

He found, instead, a second pool and fell into it, then scrambled up on hands and knees and finally staggered to his feet to keep moving ahead, almost by instinct. Abruptly, he was granted a reprieve. The heat, though still immense, seemed to lessen ever so slightly. Squinting around, Gib discovered that his wild dash had outdistanced the flames. But only for a moment. They crackled close behind him, a menacing promise that he had not escaped their embrace, moving more rapidly as every passing second increased the fire's size. He realized despairingly that time, too, was being burned away. He could not stand a second passage through

the inferno. And he still had not found her. A terrible blackness like night, compounded of smoke and failing consciousness, was closing in upon him.

And then, when it seemed that he could go no farther, he saw her. She lay outstretched on the ground beside the final pool where the cliffs closed in to end the canyon. He had found her at last.

Stumbling, choking her name, Gib lurched towards the sprawled figure and fell across her, while the flames bellowed close behind. She did not move or reply and for one despairing instant he believed himself too late after all, that she was dead. But then, close by his anguished face, one small hand twitched convulsively. Janie was alive!

He summoned up his last reserve of strength. Scooping her limp body against his chest, Gib reeled forward into the pond. He clamped his hand over her nose and mouth and squatted down, letting the waters close over them. The largest of the pools was fed by the waterfall trickle; it was also the deepest, nearly four feet at the centre. And, though grass-choked and slimy, it was to Gib at this moment a blessed sanctuary.

Janie began to struggle weakly in his grasp, seeking oxygen, but he held her firmly beneath the surface as long as he dared. When at last he raised both their heads into the air, the flames were directly above them, waiting to pounce. He loosed his grip on her face, pried her mouth open. Strangling, coughing, Janie tried to fight free from his imprisoning arms.

"Breathe!" he shouted in her ear. "Breathe, Janie!" He squeezed her narrow chest. Though still unconscious, she seemed to understand. She sucked in a greedy breath. Gib pulled her down into the water once more.

He didn't know how many times they repeated the action, the long moments beneath the surface, the quick gulp of searing, sooty, life-giving air, and down into the depths again. The air immediately above the pool was barely

breathable, but the very heat that threatened them in the dead-end canyon was forcing the fatal strangling smoke to boil up away from them in the giant natural chimney. He lost track of time in this weird world of water and flame. But finally, when on one occasion they surfaced, it seemed to Gib that something had changed. The redness was fading away, to be replaced by grey and black. His dazed mind struggled to assimilate this information until finally he understood. The fire had passed over them. They had been spared.

Hugging Janie to him, Gib crawled on to the sandy bank. It was still hot, and of the weeds only ashes remained, grisly evidence of the holocaust that had swept by. But the breeze which had fanned the blaze was now busy clearing away the smoke and he could see the tortured skeletons of trees that stood in the midst of a carpet of black.

He made the vast effort required to rise to his feet and, cradling the little girl against his chest, began to stagger down the canyon, away from the fire. The debris, still smouldering, burned his feet even through his boots, but Gib scarcely noticed. He was filled with the wonderful sensation of life. Not only himself, but Janie, still lived. He had taken on man and wilderness and fire besides, and he had beaten them all.

He came finally to the clearing and saw the untouched greenery beyond, a poignant contrast to the desolation among which he stood. Behind him, the fire raged on, cheated of human life perhaps, but still unvanquished. Yet the fire had its problems, too. Like Janie, it was now trapped in the box canyon, at least for as long as the breeze held. With a little luck, it might even burn itself out with no further damage. In any case, the posse was on its way and, between them, they should be able to settle the fire. As if in agreement, he heard faintly in the distance the roar of the helicopter drawing steadily closer.

He looked down at the unconscious face in the crook of his

elbow. Let the fire burn, he thought. I got her back and that's what matters. Trees will grow again; a human being comes but once. And, gazing tenderly at Janie Cooper, Gib saw her not as another man's child, but as his own, the daughter that he would some day have himself. He and Alys. "I hope she's just like you," he murmured.

Janie stirred in his arms. Her eyes drifted open and she stared up at him blankly. When, incredibly, she smiled. "Hi," she whispered.

To move his seared face at all was agony, but Gib could not repress his answering grin. "Hi," he told her huskily. "Hi, Janie."